やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】
illustration ぽんかん⑧

9
nine

GAGAGA

雪ノ下雪乃
yukino yukinoshita

由比ヶ浜結衣
yui yuigahama
三浦優美子
yumiko miura

Chapter 0: Be that as it may, that room continues to enact its unending every day

The wind was tapping against the window. With the sea nearby and the lack of tall buildings in the area, the wind continued blowing against the building without dying out.

The sound attracted my attention as I reflexively looked outside the window.

The trees with dropping leaves trembled and clouds of dust floated in the dry wind. The scattered passers-by rose up their colors and sporadic passers-by had the collars of their coats stretched up and their shoulders ducked in as they walked.

Winter had finally made its way to this school as well. Even though the same season was supposed to have come last year, I never knew how cold this blowing wind was.

Mingled in the noise of the wind were several voices.

“See, it’s like super dry right now right? So when Yumiko brought in a small humidifier, it was really puffing during class. And like recently, the USJ… USA? Or whatever, can give you electricity. You know, that thing!”

Yuigahama would mix in body and hand gestures while casually moving her body as she energetically talked. Yukinoshita would look at her with a smile and nod responsively to her.

“I see. That must be convenient.”

Yukinoshita normally wasn’t the talkative type, so a short response like that wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. But that smile was something I just couldn’t look directly at.

I slowly removed my gaze from the floor. Ahead of me were Yuigahama’s feet which turned in my direction.

“I know right! So I thought maybe we could get one for the room. Right, Hikki? …Hikki?”

It was likely her entire body was facing my way. Yuigahama asked me again, prompting me for a reply. Because I was absorbed in my own thoughts, my response was slightly late. To fill up that gap, after I intentionally let out a resigned sigh, I answered.

“…I’m listening. It’s USB. Why do we need to get electricity from an American place like that?”

“Ah, that’s it!”

Yuigahama clapped her hands and answered. And without waiting for neither my or Yukinoshita’s response, she quickly continued.

“Cellphones nowadays can be charged by connecting to that USB thing or whatever, it’s like super convenient, see~. And like recently, my battery tends to die out really fast too!”

Yuigahama continued the conversation and after that, she jumped to a topic about the new cellphone models.

Thanks to that, the conversation carried on without so much as a pause. However, only her words had continuity as the topic and the things that should have been at the heart of those words didn’t.

But was it because of the trees that peeked in from outside of the window, shaken by the freezing wind that I thought it looked like a drift ice from afar? If I took one step off the right path, it felt like I would sink deep into the depths.

Although the room didn’t have a calendar, I didn’t need to check to see what the date was. Checking the date slightly resembled counting down the remaining years of your life.

We were already halfway into December. Just a little over two weeks and it would be the New Year. This year was going to end.

Everything would end and you wouldn’t be able to take them back to those days.

As you gazed at the setting sun, you also became conscious of the year coming to an end.

Of course, the sun had set up until now and the year had gone by in the same way. If you asked if the sun of today was different from the sun of yesterday, the answer would be no. In the end, they were really the same thing. It’s just that only the conscious of those who looked at it had changed.

I, no, us. We most certainly had noticed what was remaining there and that’s why even the commonplace setting sun was something we had feelings of sentiment for.

But in the flowing of time, this room was the only place where time was frozen.

Ever since the student council election, not a single thing had changed as we spent time in this room. As we continued with conversations that felt out of place which could only be called emptiness and the time we spent was as if we were walking on thin ice.

“I was just thinking how cold it is, but that reminds me of something else. Like how it’s almost Christmas and all…”

Yuigahama once again diverged into another topic.

Both I and Yukinoshita participated in the conversation with hollow answers like “it’s cold”, “it sure has gotten cold”, “tomorrow’s going to be even colder”. But noticing that it wasn’t going any further than that, Yuigahama energetically pitched forward.

“Ah! Why don’t we ask Hiratsuka-sensei to add something like a stove to the room!?”

“I think that might be a little difficult.”

Yukinoshita wasn’t perturbed in the least by Yuigahama’s vigor as she gently showed a strained smiled.

“In that person’s case, I’m sure she’d want a reward for herself first.”

Then again, I got the feeling she’d prioritize making a present herself for someone instead. Someone take her already, seriously.

When both of us responded dispiritedly, Yuigahama became disheartened as well.

“I see… I guess so.”

Yuigahama’s shoulders dropped slightly with a look of dejection.

Was it like the feeling where a chain of downward slopes had ended?

Both I and Yukinoshita were originally the quiet types so there weren’t any topics we could casually bring up. That’s why, lately, Yuigahama had been the one leading most of the conversations.

Usually, all the topics were primarily casual and harmless ones. They were rather intricate ways to kill time.

I thought Yuigahama had gotten better than before at looking for ways to prolong a conversation.

No, that might be a bit wrong.

It was probably before she had joined the Service Club that she was good at this. It was her ability that she had cultivated to this day, the ability to read the mood, fill up the silence, and to superficially smooth over things as if it was nothing.

This may have been similar to how I would open a book only to not read it.

The lines of sentences and the time continued. Ignoring things while mingling in the conversation, I casually looked at the clock.

If today went the same way as the few days before, then it was almost about time for Yukinoshita to suggest going home.

As if everyone had perceived that, Yuigahama looked up at the sky from the window.

“It’s gotten pretty dark, huh?”

“…I suppose so. Shall we call it a day?”

With Yuigahama’s words as a signal, Yukinoshita closed her book and placed it in her bag. Both of us did the same, making the preparations to go home, and stood up.

As soon as the light was switched, the room was instantly shrouded in darkness. We left the room and ahead of us was the continuing darkness. We walked wordlessly down the hallway submerged in silence and made it outside from the front entrance.

The sun had already set and leaking from the school building were unreliable, flickering lights. The afterglow didn’t illuminate past the shadow of the school building either. The side which we were standing on was already submerged in the dark of the night.

“Okay, I’ll be taking the bus!”

“Yeah.”

As I responded to Yuigahama who loudly proclaimed as she raised her hand, I turned in the direction of the bike parking area. And the remaining one, Yukinoshita, watched us off and said her parting words.

“Yes, good bye.”

Because of the dark, I couldn’t see her face very well. However, it was probably that smile she was making. Yukinoshita quietly readjusted her bag and straightened out the muffler at her collar. That calm demeanor of hers gave off the image that she didn’t look any different from before.

“See you.”

When I answered with a short reply, I averted my eyes from Yukinoshita and hurried for the bike area.

But no matter how hard I tried to not look, that expression of hers would float right back in my head and wouldn’t disappear.

That smile that had not changed since that day.

I strongly pedaled away on my bike to drive that away.

You get used to it, you act friendly, and you become a shell of your former self.

Eventually, this situation called every day would get packaged and be sent to the depths of your memories and you undoubtedly would try to justify calling it a memory.

Time was the medicine to everything or so they say.

But that was wrong. Time was nothing but a slow inducing poison. It was something meant to end things and get you to give up on things, slowly eroding away the things of the past.

As I flew to downtown with my bike, the illumination that decorated all the houses caught my eye. As Yuigahama said, Christmas was almost here.

Back when I was smaller, I recognized it only as a day where I could receive the presents that I wanted. Well, it was something like a lesser version of a birthday.

However, that was different now. I was no longer a small child and there weren't any presents prepared.

Above all else.

All the things I wished for and wanted, I no longer have them.

And surely enough, I wasn't even allowed to desire anything.

Komachi's Christmas

Library Card

Gift card

House Appliance

...BUT, WHAT KOMACHI WANTS THE MOST IS ONII-CHAN'S HAPPINESS. KYAAAAAAAA! THAT JUST NOW SCORED A SUPER, MEGA AMOUNT OF KOMACHI POINTS!

K H

Present List

A.L.S.O.... WE'RE OUT OF DETERGENT, SO MAKE SURE TO BUY SOME ON YOUR WAY BACK HOME. ♡

Chapter 1: Again, Isshiki Iroha knocks on the door

…Is she an idiot?

Moments before class was about to begin, that mutter slipped out of my mouth.

On the single sheet of paper mixed in my bag was familiar handwriting. Apparently, it was addressed to me from my little sister, Komachi.

The lovely letter set was arranged with Christmas color themed lamé that sparkled like snow and inside the envelope was an extremely uncute wish list of presents.

Well, what she really wanted to tell me was probably to buy detergent on the way back home in that last portion. This was what they called a Komachi joke… right? If not, then this wasn't actually a list with high liquidity, right? Oh gosh, my little sister's so scary.

For now, ignoring those first three things, I'll make sure to buy detergent on the way home.

But those first three things were the only things I could ignore. The remaining written portion pulled at my chest.

--My happiness.

What exactly was that again?

Happiness was what again…? The delicious soy sauce at my house?[1] You don't say, I already had that! I was so glad I was born in Chiba!! Chiba's soy sauce is number one in Japaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan! (Our production output is).

Oooh, I just missed a bullet there. Had I not been born in Chiba, "I wonder what happiness is…" would've filled my head and I'd be in deep crap. Thank you, Kikkoman.[2] So that was that, but what's the kikko in Kikkoman about? Forever age 17?[3] Hey, hey.

Or whatever. I had to brag a little about Chiba while poking fun at it because otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to take those words upfront since it was too embarrassing. Komachi probably felt the same way which was why she went through the trouble of garnishing the letter with needless words. We siblings were spitting images of each other.

But still, for Komachi to give me a letter, it looked like she may have had something in mind.

The chain of events regarding the student council election the other day was something that concerned Komachi as well. Or rather, I was the one who asked Komachi for her cooperation.

Whether that was a good thing or not, I still wasn't sure.

Komachi didn't pester me for the details of the outcome as if she was being considerate of how I was feeling. Well, even if she asked me persistently, I didn't think I would've been able to explain it well and I'd probably just get irritated instead. And then, if we ended getting into another fight, I wouldn't stand a chance.

I suppose it was because Komachi was aware of this that she was being considerate even if it was roundabout. As expected, a top-notch little sister.

Since it's a request from my little sister, granting her wish was Mountain Mountain,[4] but unfortunately, I didn't have any money. To top it off, I couldn't even grant one her of wishes that she mixed in as a joke either.

Hikigaya Hachiman's happiness, Hikigaya Hachiman's wish, and Hikigaya Hachiman's desire.

To this day, I had never given them too much thought before.

So, what was my happiness and what was it that I wanted? I didn't know any of them, but here I was today.

If I had something I could wish for just like how Komachi wished something for me. If that wish of mine would actually be heard. And if that wish was allowed.

If it was me…

…If it was me, I'd wish for Komachi's happiness, duh! I'd wish for our Pretty Cure Cure Lovely and Honey Princess Fortune and do a Happiness Charge![5]

Still, since she was my cute little sister, I had to make sure not to bother her during this season right now. After all, she was a student taking tests right now.

I didn't want to make her needlessly anxious as well as take up her time during an important period like this.

So for now, putting my happiness and so forth aside, I folded the letter and slipped it into the inner pocket of my uniform. I felt slightly warm in just that small area. What's this? Don't you love your little sister just a tad too much? No problem, she's my little sister, so I was safe. Then again, I was completely out in a different meaning, wasn't I?

Letting my face loosen up from just looking at a letter given to my little sister was considerably bad, so I sat up straight and fixed my collar.

It was that. I had better protect my cool image. By the way, there were many cases where while you thought you were cool, the people around you saw you as a gloomy person instead, so you had to be careful (self research).

As I wasted time looking at the letter from Komachi, it was just about time for morning homeroom to start. My classmates would frantically rush into the class.

And in that group of people appeared a girl listlessly walking, not paying any heed to things like the chime. Her bluish, dark long hair fluttered in unison with every step.

Kawasomething… No, Yamasomething? Or was it Yutakasomething? Well, let's just go with Somekawayutaka-san. Kawasomething-san headed for her seat, indifferent to what was going on in the class. Halfway through, her cold and composed eyes clashed with mine.

After our eyes met, we were both quiet for a moment. And then for some reason, we both froze up.

We may be strangers, but I should at least greet her. Well, it's not like I knew her name though. Anyway, I was in her debt for her help with the student council election the other day as well. I never did get to thank her. But back to the present, I didn't know what to say or how to talk to her.

"Aah… well, you know."

For the time being, I spat out a meaningless sigh and empty words, hoping to find a trigger to start up a conversation. When I did, the other party looked like she may have been trying to figure out what to say as well. Her lips wiggled around and she then spoke in a small voice.

"…Morning."

"Y-Yeah."

She greeted me with her still stone cold expression and I reflexively gave a half-baked reply.

Because she pulled the rug from under me, I sat there unable to say anything worthwhile. The conversation didn't go any further than that and she hurried to her desk near the window side in the back.

Well, it was kind of awkward with that long pause after all. The best choice at a time like this was to run away. Seeing that I was already in my seat, the only remaining option was in that direction.

Whether she had no sleep or whether she wasn't motivated, upon making it to her desk, she collapsed on top of it. As I watched her, I calmly reflected on our earlier exchange.

…Hey, hey, seriously? Kawasomething-san greeted me. We both didn't even know each other's names, so wasn't this some great progress?

Though, even elementary kids would properly greet people. In fact, they were even taught in elementary to be assertive when greeting suspicious people. With that in mind, for the other party to give their greeting first meant they were preemptively spreading a rumor against suspicious people! It was basically that. Something along the lines of "what are you looking at, punk, where middle school are you from?"[6] maybe?

Well, for a suspicious person whose expression loosened up from a letter that his little sister gave him, a jab of this level was expected. But wait just a moment. If my memory serves me right, I recall her grinning over a mail from her little brother, Kawasaki Taishi. Ah, that's right, her name was Kawasaki.

…Oh my, what's with that girl, she's so suspicious. Next time, I'll greet her and keep her in check.

Greetings were really important, weren't they?

This world had become a world where you had to be wary of those who greeted you, not where you had to be wary of the misunderstanding that being greeted meant the other party wanted to get closer to you. POISON.[7]

As I watched Kawasaki, I rested my chin on my hands and looked around the room as well.

There weren't any noticeable changes in my classmates, but the scenery they were in looked slightly different.

The lockers in the back were jammed with coats and mufflers. There was even a teakettle pot someone freely brought in as well. The girls had blankets on their laps, covering a good portion of their legs.

And amongst those girls was a girl who was openly showing her long legs. It was Miura Yumiko.

As she twirled her winding blonde hair, she slowly alternated her crossed legs that stretched out from her short skirt. When she did, the hems of her skirt fluttered lightly.

I reflexively used my force of will to restrain my eyes from being pulled in. I managed to hold out so that she was barely in my field of vision. There's no way I could restrain myself, huh? I was already looking too. Ah, but wait a second! For her to be sitting meant she was letting her guard down and the scene would… Or so I thought, but there was this waft of smoke floating around Miura. What is this, censorship? Are they going to remove it in the BDs?

My eyes were normally half-open, but I thought maybe I could see something (pink) if I were to narrow my eyes. When I stared with my clouded eyes, what I discovered was a small machine puffing out smoke. Aah, that must've been the humidifier Yuigahama was talking about. It definitely was puffing things out. It was becoming the kind of smoke used for when an enemy character made his appearance.

Miura was acting like her usual Queen self and next to her were the same serving two, Yuigahama and Ebina-san.

"Yumiko, aren't you cold?"

Ebina-san spoke with consideration and Miura gently flicked away her blonde drills with a confident smile.

"Not reaaaally? This much is normal, isn't it?"

Although she said that, Miura lightly sneezed. Yuigahama and Ebina-san looked at Miura who had an embarrassed face and made warm expressions. Yep, yep, I feel kind of warm myself.

In contrast to Miura whose captivating bare legs were on public display, Ebina-san and Yuigahama were wearing jerseys underneath their skirt. Hey, think of the people who have to see you in that appearance. It really drops morale, so please stop it.

…No, but wait a second. Now that I took into consideration that only high school girls sport that kind of appearance, then I felt like it was good in its own way. The mismatch of the crappy, lame jersey underneath the skirt brought about a mysterious ensemble. Wasn't it exactly because of this hidden nature that there existed a brilliance that allowed you to spread the wings of your imagination? You guys are my wings! It'd be a problem if you underestimated a boy's imagination!

But the guys next to them looked like they didn't have any interest at all as the jerseys Yuigahama and the others wore didn't catch their fancy. Good grief, youngins these days truly were lacking in their ability to imagine. Well, it's not like they were asking to look at them, so that's fine, I suppose.

But while I was carefully observing them, it apparently wasn't an issue of a lack of imagination.

I wasn't sure if I could call this evidence, but Tobe was rocking his body restlessly as he brushed and pulled his hair at the nape of his neck. As he did that, he would make small glances towards the group. It looked somewhat uncomfortable.

He looked at Hayama, then at Miura and the others, and then he turned to Oooka and Yamato.

"But yeah, it's seriously cold."

"Yeah."

Oooka answered and nodded and Yamato made an exaggerated sigh.

"To have a club on a day like this, no way."

"Aah. There's that too."

So was there club or not…? I identified "there isn't" and "there is" as having the same meaning and I seriously thought that the world was guided by the Law of Cycles.[8]

Tobe made a frivolous smile and looked at Hayama, Miura, and the others hoping for a similar opinion with a "right?"

When he did, Hayama made a smile and didn't give a particularly worthwhile answer.

Miura caught a glimpse of that exchange. She peeked at Hayama's face, but she didn't say anything.

From a distance, you probably wouldn't have thought there was anything different about Hayama's group. If I ignored that trivial exchange they just had, even I'd think there wasn't anything out of the ordinary.

However, there definitely was a rift in there somewhere.

Although the boys and girls were at the same place, there was no actual interaction between the two.

I finally realized that it wasn't so much that Tobe and the others weren't worrying about Miura and the others, but it was exactly because it bothered them that they were trying to act as if they didn't see anything.

It may have looked like the same as always, but it was certainly different.

Perhaps it was because there was an uncomfortable distance between the master pieces, Hayama and Miura, who were the centers of the group. If there was a rift between the centers, then it was obvious there would be one between the groups as well.

No one would talk about it.

But choosing not to talk about it indicated how detached they were and this only served to widen the gap between them.

Did something happen between them? Tobe wasn't getting ignored because Miura hated him, right? Oh my, what a poor fellow! Reminds me of myself!

The problem probably didn't lie with Tobe, but with Miura who was concerned about that double date the other day. Well, if you thought about it normally, then it was Hayama we were talking about. I most certainly thought it didn't mean anything if he was just hanging out with girls from other schools. But, apparently the way I saw him was slightly different.

True enough, Hayama wasn't the type that would be the center of conspicuous rumors of being a philanderer. In fact, you could see that he kept a certain distance between girls he didn't know very well.

But it might be exactly because of that that Miura felt uneasy having seen him in person at that place.

The Hayama that I saw and the Hayama that Miura saw were probably different. In other words, Miura saw Hayama as someone who wouldn't do that sort of thing.

…Well, you know, I feel kind of bad about it. The reason Hayama was doing that was partly my fault and Miura ended up anxious since he got mixed up with me. But the one who needlessly got involved was also to blame too, so I absolutely wasn't the one wholly guilty here. But it's not like I did something bad to Miura… I did see her panties (pink) that one time so my guilty conscience towards Miura accelerated even more.

As expected, if Miura wasn't energetic, then the entire group would be gloomy. But Miura wasn't the only one out of place.

Yuigahama wasn't her usual self as well.

She'd smile as she quietly listened to the conversation Tobe and the others had and she'd take turns listening to Miura and Ebina-san as they talked.

Yuigahama was different from when she was in the club room.

She wouldn't assertively try to speak up or force the conversation to continue. Above all else, she didn't behave in a way that looked like she would try to read into the responses and expressions of the other party.

It's possible that being with Miura and the others gave Yuigahama peace of mind. Surely enough, the club wasn't a place she could feel at ease anymore.

That fact left a huge burden on my chest.

The conversation in Hayama's group had stopped, but Tobe would go "aah" while keeping his sigh from slipping out. From there, he followed into his next words.

"…But ya know? It's been freakin' cold these days. Totally freezing here."

Tobe! The same thing! You're talking about the same thing from earlier you know! I mean, sure the weather was the number one topic to turn to when you needed something to talk about, but you're abusing it, you know… It's becoming something like that Gondoh, Gondoh, Rain, Gondoh thing.[9]

Oooka and Yamato responded to Tobe's words in the same way they did earlier.

"Well, it is winter already."

"I know, right?"

Tobe and the others continued the same conversation that seemed like the world was operating on loops and not pre-established harmony.[10] But the Tobe from today on was different. Well, I didn't know how he was normally though. Sorry for not having any interest in Tobe, okay?

"Speakin' of which, ya guys plannin' anythin' for Christmas?"

Although Tobe looked like he was asking Hayama, weren't his ears pointing suspiciously in the direction of Ebina-san?

Noticing that sign, Ebina-san took the initiative.

"I'll be busy with preparations for next year, I think."

Aah, I imagine so. There was that winter festival that would be open during dawn after all. As she nodded convincingly, Miura reacted with a twitch, looking disinterested up until now. She stopped the hands that were twirling her hair around.

"Christmas huh…? Ebina is, well, whatever… But what's everyone else going to do?"

As she said that, her gaze was slightly looking in Hayama's direction, but she quickly looked away. She was restlessly fidgeting with the hems of her skirt and pushing them away under the desk. Her cheeks were looking a little flushed (pink).

Ooh, you go girl! Do your best, Miura…! Then again, why was I rooting for Ms. Queen anyway? Ah, it's not like I was rooting for Tobe-kun at all.

But Hayama leaned his head turning my support into nothing.

"I might have some things to do…"

"Eh?"

As if those words were surprising, Miura's voice slightly choked up as she questioned him.

“Ha-Hayato… D-Did you have some plans?”

“Hm…? Ah, just some business at home.”

Hayama responded with a smile that didn’t look as restless as it did earlier. Instead it had its usual warmth to it.

“H-Hmmm…”

Miura looked away from Hayama and began fiddling with her hair again, acting indifferently. She looked restless as if she wanted to ask about something, but she never went further than that.

When the conversation between those two stopped, the boys and girls were split up again. The topics naturally dispersed between the two; the boys talked about club activities during the winter break and the girls discussed what they were expecting to buy on Christmas.

Tobe seemed reluctant with how things were going and after he scratched his head, he stretched out a finger and looked at everyone.

“Oh, how about that then! Hatsumode[11] or something.”

It looked like Tobe was trying his best to shift the topic back to earlier. I wasn’t sure when Hayama described Tobe as the mood maker, but I guess that was true… Although it looked like he wasn’t thinking about anything, he was surprisingly considerate of those around him. Or maybe it was because he realized that it wouldn’t be good if the gap between them continued to grow. Because he had been living up until now as someone quick to go with the flow, he was probably sensitive to it.

“Mmm, I think I’m going to spend the New Year with my family though…”

Tobe was putting in the effort, but Ebina once again sidestepped the issue. Tobe’s shoulders dropped instantly.

Or so I thought, but Ebina-san placed a finger on her cheek and went into thought.

“But it doesn’t have to be that day… It’d be nice if we could all go out.”

Ebina-san emphasized the “we” in her words and Miura suddenly raised her head.

“Ah, that sounds good?”

“Yep, it does.”

When Yuigahama agreed, so did Yamato and Oooka who nodded. When they did, Tobe would look at everyone’s face as he would go “Right? Right?” After seeing that, Hayama gently made a broad smile.

“…Sure.”

“R-Right!? Then, then, then, when should we go? Ah, Hayato-kun, are ya the type that can go any time? By the way, I can go any time.”

“We have club you know…”

Hayama sighed with a mix of resignation. Listening on the side was Miura who spoke up in disinterest.

“So, when should we do it…? I’m like totally free whenever.”

Miura’s tone clearly sounded like she was disinterested, but when she looked at her nails that she raised up to the lights, she looked agitated somehow. When she confirmed that everything was right on the mark, she let out a giggle.

Ebina-san looked at Miura with gentle eyes.

They were finally able to have a warm conversation again. Yuigahama sighed in relief to that.

“Ah, sorry.”

Yuigahama excused herself from Miura and the others and left them. Oh my, could she be going out to pick some flowers? But still, how would this kind of jargon work for guys? “I’m going to go hunt for some deer for a little bit” might sound a little cool.

I thought about that, but apparently that wasn’t the case. Yuigahama headed for her locker in the back and was sifting through something. After that, instead of going back to Miura and the others, for some reason, she was approaching me.

“Hikki.”

When she called me, I turned towards Yuigahama. When I did, Yuigahama stood still for a moment and twisted her body uncomfortably. And then, she spoke reluctantly.

“You were looking over here a lot so…”

“Eh, er, it’s not like I was looking or anything…”

I unintentionally mumbled my answer. Sure, I was definitely watching, but being told that directly was a little awkward. Just as I was about to continue with excuses, Yuigahama shook her hands and interrupted me with a resigned tone.

“No, no, you were totally looking. It’s because Hikki was giving that weird glaring look. To be honest, it really made me go ‘ugh’.”

What’s with the “ugh”…? Isn’t that kind of mean?

“If anything, you’re the one that shouldn’t be looking over here…”

“Eh!? Er, that’s like, like you know! I just kind of sensed it you know! Like there’s this pressure or chill or something…”

Those two were quite different, but whatever… As she shook her hands restlessly and voiced excuses in a panicky manner, Yuigahama added something at the very end.

“Anyway, why were you looking over here? Did you need something?”

Although I thought that there really wasn’t any reason why I was looking in response to that question, but it pulled at my heart somewhere. Why was I looking at them?

“…No, not really… Well, you guys stick out so I couldn’t help it.”

“Uh huh…”

Yuigahama’s response gave off a weird feeling that she was both convinced and not convinced at the same time. However, it wasn’t like I had said a lie. Hayama’s group stuck out. Things that stood out naturally attracted your eyes. That’s why unintentionally looking wasn’t anything odd.

However, the reason I was watching them definitely wasn’t because of just that.

Just how were you supposed to fix something that came unstuck and dropped to the bottom?

If it was Hayama's group, then I felt they would've given me the answer to that.

The key point behind human observation wasn't just to watch other people. Instead, it might've been to emulate what they did as well as reflect on your life.

The reason I was watching Hayama's group was probably because despite being aware that in that group there existed the relationship I thought was superficial and deceitful, I was assimilating that into my current self.

Tobe may have been reacting unconsciously to the sensitive atmosphere, but Ebina-san was probably aware as she tried to close the rift.

By slowly reconciling the slight differences in opinion and feelings of discomfort, Miura, Hayama, Tobe, and Ebina-san would regulate how they would act with each other, looking for a universal compromise that they would all agree with. That was how I saw it.

Even that kind of relationship existed.

They, too, had actual doubts about their own communication, worrying and fumbling about.

--In that case, what exactly was fake?

"Hikki?"

Just as I was about to be entrapped in my own thoughts, Yuigahama's voice brought me back. I raised my face and Yuigahama was looking at me with a slightly worried face. Before realizing it, our faces were close enough that I could distinctively feel her warm breath and sense her moist eyes on me.

I jerked back onto my chair and took some distance. Now wasn't the time to show an expression that would get Yuigahama anxious. There was no doubt she was also at a loss about the Service Club's current situation. I was the cause behind it as well, so I should at least try to conduct myself properly.

I stopped thinking for now. I thought it was a problem to think about only when I was alone. And those times were abundant. This was where being a loner was convenient.

I quickly changed the topic.

“Anyway, you guys should be a little quieter if you don’t want anyone looking at you. It’s that, you know. I bet 40% of the stares directed at you were probably saying how annoying you guys were.”

“Uu, I wonder about that… But Tobecchi’s there, so I don’t think that’s possible.”

She sure did say something really cruel there. Sure, Tobe may be annoying and obnoxious, but he had some good parts to him too. Like how durable the roots of his hair were or something.

Well, still, noisy or not, there were times when your eyes would get drawn away anyway. Even as I talked with Yuigahama right now, my eyes moved around arbitrarily.

See, the thing is, when something moved around in your line of sight, it tended to grab your attention right? I don’t think I need to mention that someone cute would be even more alluring.

Maybe that was why my eyes simultaneously looked in the direction of the door when it slid open at the front of class.

The person who entered wearing a long sleeved jersey and long pants was Totsuka Saika. He came in breathing out a sigh as if the hallway was chilling down. Reflexively, I breathed in. Aah, the air that Totsuka breathed out just now was now inside of me… Okay, even for me, that was really disgusting.

When Totsuka noticed Yuigahama and me, he walked in our direction.

“Morning.”

Along with his morning greeting was a smile that looked like a blooming flower. Just as I thought, greetings were important… I thought it would be a truly sad thing if that kind of greeting was used only for the sake of preventing crime, yep.

“Morning, Sai-chan.”

“Yo, morning.”

When Yuigahama and I greeted him back, Totsuka's eyes blinked childishly. He sure is cute… Ah, no, that's not it. Why was Totsuka slightly, adorably surprised? In fact, I should be the one surprised at how cute he was.

"Something wrong, Totsuka?"

Did we just say something weird? I asked Totsuka and he tried to brush it off as he slightly shook his hands in front of his chest noticing it.

"I just thought it was rare to see you two together in class like this."

"R-Really?"

Yuigahama answered in surprise and Totsuka quickly added in a panic as if being considerate.

"Ah, it's just an image I didn't think about."

Once he said that, that certainly did bring it to my attention. It was rare for Yuigahama to come talk to me in class.

Aah, that reminded me. Even though she went to the lockers in the back, she didn't bring anything along, did she? If she suddenly came up to talk to me, it was likely people would think what was going on. So that's why she added a cushion to avoid that. I guess that's expected of her consideration…

Still, even with that kind of consideration, if the people watching actually paid attention, they'd notice how unnatural it was.

"…Did something happen?"

Totsuka looked at Yuigahama and me in turn and asked with a worried tone.

"No, not at all…! W-Well, it's just something to do with a request for club, I guess."

"Aah, club huh?"

Yuigahama mumbled in a panic and Totsuka looked convinced as he clapped his hands. Yep, not knowing to suspect others was a virtue. For someone as pure as Totsuka, there was the

possibility that those who attempted to deceive him would end up dying from the guilt of their good conscience instead.

“But if you can do your club like before, I’m glad.”

Totsuka smiled as he said that and I thought he was saying it innocently. Totsuka was involved in the chain of events regarding the student council election as well. It was likely that the sight of Yuigahama and me talking about the club from the side was proof that everything went perfectly well.

However, Yuigahama’s expression stiffened.

“Y-Yeah… Ah, I know! If you have any other problems, you should come again, Sai-chan!”

“…Yeah.”

Yuigahama momentarily choked up on her words, but quickly smoothed it over with a smile and spoke.

I wasn’t sure if you could say “like before”. We were definitely talking with Yukinoshita and by all means, it wasn’t a serious situation at all. No one was getting ignored and there weren’t conflicting opinions.

Nothing happened.

No, there was nothing at all. That was all there was to it.

Totsuka tilted his head to our sporadic exchange and he sent a dubious stare. His eyes were asking if something had happened. But I felt like I wouldn’t have been able to explain it properly. I quickly shifted the direction of the conversation.

“No, see, it’s basically that. It’s just there’s nothing happening that we’d totally be up for anything that came along! We’ll welcome it anytime, yeah!”

“You’re more motivated than usual!?”

Yuigahama’s eyes opened in shock. Wait, do I normally look that unmotivated…?

“Ahaha. Okay, then if something comes up, I’ll go.”

Totsuka smiled amusingly and peeked at the clock. It was almost time for the homeroom teacher to come.

“It looks like homeroom’s going to start soon.”

“Oh, you’re right. Okay, then we should get going.”

After they spoke, Yuigahama and Totsuka went away from my seat. And in that moment.

“…Ah, that’s right, Hikki.”

Yuigahama quickly turned around and stealthily moved her mouth to my ears.

A light, floral scent drifted by and a soft breath hit my ears. When she unexpectedly got closer, the warmth that I felt during that time in the evening after school in the cold room where something had ended came to mind.

My heart suddenly jumped. Yuigahama whispered in a quiet voice.

“…Let’s go to club together, okay?”

After saying those few words, Yuigahama dashed for her seat without waiting for my response. As I watched her off, I was squeezing my chest without noticing.

My heart wasn’t jumping around anymore. In fact, it felt like for how much my heart was jumping around, it was eating away inside of me and I was only able to barely keep it at.

The reason Yuigahama went out of her way to say that was because she felt it was hard to go to club.

I felt the same way. I just didn’t feel inclined to go.

Even though we went every day without fail, it felt cruel somewhere. Even though the three of us probably didn’t even want to go there.

However, we didn’t want to admit that we would still go. It’s because we just couldn’t admit to how big the things that we lost were.

Or possibly, we were going only out of obligation, only out of a sense of duty as if we wanted to preserve it and maintain it, similar to how different living things would try to preserve its kind as well as themselves.

Days where you just went about it so you weren't running away.

These were the days that you lamented over the deceased.

In order to not make excuses for the things those were lost. In order not to accept giving into irrationality. That's why, we would brace ourselves and behave like we usually do more than we would before.

That was surely deception.

However, the one who chose that was me.

You weren't allowed to reconsider a choice. Time was already irreversible and there were many things that couldn't be recovered. To grieve meant betraying your past self.

To regret something was proof that what you were holding onto was that big. That's why, I wouldn't grieve. In reality, I was able to grab onto something that I normally couldn't get a hold of. That fact alone should've been enough satisfaction.

If you got used to good luck and happiness, then they were nothing more than something regular, your every day. Once that came to an end, then that was when you'd feel unhappiness.

In that case, if I presume that reaching out for nothing from here on was the natural thing to do, just doing that would lead to a fulfilling life.

At the very least, it should be done in such a way that wouldn't deny my past self.

I would spend the rest of my days from now on in that way.

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As sadly as ever, it was after school with me not having absorbed a single thing from class. I finished the preparations to leave and was the first one to exit the classroom. Just before sliding open the door, I glanced in Yuigahama's direction. It looked like Yuigahama was still talking about something with Miura and the others.

Well, considering she told me to go together with her, then I should be waiting. Even so, there wasn't a need to wait in a conspicuous area.

I walked into the hallway and after taking a few steps, I leaned against the wall.

A whole minute had yet to pass when Yuigahama came rushing out of the classroom. When she looked around restlessly, she quickly noticed me. She approached me with an upset face.

"Why are you going ahead!?"

"I didn't. I'm just waiting here."

"I can see that…! Huh? Okay, that's good then."

After Yuigahama was conveniently convinced, she took a small breath and readjusted her backpack with some vigor.

"…Shall we get going?"

"Yeah."

We exchanged glances in the hallway and began walking in the direction of the special building.

Accomplices in crime came to mind when we exchanged looks.

I kept my walking pace more lax than usual. If I went in the same pace as I did normally, I was sure I'd leave Yuigahama behind.

Unlike the classroom we were in earlier, the hallway was remarkably colder.

There wasn't a single person who walked by as only our footsteps echoed in the hallway. We merely walked in silence.

Yuigahama was lively in class, but she was quiet right now. It was almost as if she was suffering from the backlash from then.

But with the club room almost nearby, Yuigahama spoke up, unable to handle the silence any longer.

“Hey…”

“Hm?”

When I moaned questioningly back, Yuigahama feebly shook her head.

“…Nevermind.”

“I see.”

When I answered, silence emerged again. Once we turned the next corner, we would arrive at the club. To me, the club was just part of my day, but I wonder how it was for Yuigahama. Yuigahama should’ve been eating lunch with Yukinoshita in there even now. It suddenly interested me and I asked about it.

“Oh yeah, what do you do for lunch?”

“Eh? Mmm, the same thing I’ve been doing like usual.”

Yuigahama thought for a little and made a troubled smile when she said so.

“…I see.”

After hearing that, I felt convinced enough. There’s no doubt that what they talked about were all pointless things. Yuigahama would say something and Yukinoshita would answer. That exchange was what they had been doing all along.

Thinking on it, just the sight of it was the same as it always had been up until now. That’s why Yuigahama choked on her answer.

The same members spent the time together at the same place at the same time yet there was no way you could think of it as the same thing.

Ever since that day, I was still looking for the mistake that I had commited. Still unable to find the answer, I put my hands on the door.

The door was already unlocked.

Even though we left homeroom as soon as it ended, the master of this room had still made it here earlier than we did.

I opened the door and upon taking a step inside, the room felt terribly deserted. Was there really a club like this with absolutely nothing at all in it? The same desk and chairs and the tea set that had not been used at all recently were still there.

And Yukinoshita Yukino was also there, unchanging as ever.

“Good evening.”

“Yahallo! Yukinon!”

Yuigahama energetically greeted her back and sat in her designated seat. I nodded lightly and arrived at my seat. These unmoving seats seemed like they were stakes fastened to the floor.

Yukinoshita sat in her seat, always sitting up straight as she returned to reading her book. Yuigahama took out her cellphone while I took out my paperback book from my bag again.

These actions were as if they were a set of rituals that we had adhered ourselves to. I even thought we could return back to before if we tried to the same thing as before. But, no matter how satisfied the conditions for activation were, that was impossible. If we tried to only superficially emulate it, then eventually, things would get worse.

A sigh wouldn’t come out.

“You know what, today, Sai-chan—“

Yuigahama suddenly spoke up. The way she was speaking resembled a little child trying her best to talk with her mother. However, that wasn’t it. All Yuigahama was trying to do was to shoot out words in succession in order to do something about the stagnating mood.

This resembled the same Yuigahama who read between the lines, but was unable to say the things she wanted to say.

Noticing that, I decided to jump on board with Yuigahama’s conversation.

The endless exchange. Just how long was this going to continue? Just how long could this go on? If this couldn’t go on any longer, what would happen?

I’m sure today, just like yesterday, would go by in the same way.

And then, it would probably be the same for tomorrow and the day after as well.

In a closed world, there wasn't peace, but impasse and stagnation. The only remaining path was rotten, eventually being forgotten in time.

When Yuigahama ran out of topics to talk about, the conversation stopped. The sudden lull enveloped the room.

At that time, the door was knocked on as if destroying the stillness and the feeling of impasse in the room.

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The door was knocked on again.

We reflexively looked at each other since it's been awhile since we had a visitor. I had no idea as to what these two were thinking about regarding this sudden visitor. Yuigahama had a surprised expression as she looked at the door while Yukinoshita's expression didn't change. As for me, I was biting on my lips, not having realized it.

"Come in."

Yukinoshita glanced at the door and called out. The person waited for her voice and opened the door.

"Senpaaai..."

A single girl was pressing against her eyes with her baggy cardigan while her flaxen hair fluttered about as she entered the room.

It was Sobu High's student council president, Isshiki Iroha. Even though she had become the student council president, her uniform was still out of shape as usual.

Upon Isshiki's appearance, Yuigahama made a surprised face while Yukinoshita gently squinted. I probably had a disgusted look. She was appointed as the student council president just recently so why was she here already…? It didn't look like she was here to fool around though…

Isshiki approached me with a cute, clingy voice, pathetic even, while paying no attention to our hesitant looks. She purposely broke into tears while moaning "fueee..."

"Senpaaai, this isn't good, this isn't good…"

As sly as ever… You're kind of stimulating my desire to protect right now, could you please stop…? I'll end up wanting to help you out, darn it. I would've immediately came to her rescue if it wasn't for the fact that it was Isshiki.

"Iroha-chan, what's wrong? Anyway, have a seat."

"Ah, Yui-senpai, thank you very much."

When Yuigahama suggested the chair, Isshiki sat down with an expression as if her break down earlier had flew off somewhere and never happened.

After seeing that, Yukinoshita called out to her.

"For now, why don't you tell us your story?"

Yukinoshita's voice didn't sound any different from usual and there weren't any hints of ill will in it either. I was relieved at how she handled it. But at the same time, a feeling of discomfort settled in along with my relieved self.

Why was I relieved right now?

Before I could dig out the true nature behind that discomfort, Isshiki spoke up.

"The thing is… The student council's first job started last week."

"Ah, you're already working, huh? That was quick!"

Yuigahama responded back to which Isshiki would as well and she continued on.

"And so, that job is suuuper bad…"

Isshiki's energy suddenly dropped the moment she uttered those words. Apparently, the details regarding that job came to mind. It must be pretty bad, huh…? With frightening thoughts in mind, I decided to ask what the job entailed.

"What's bad about it?"

When I asked, Isshiki quickly raised her head.

"It's almost Christmas, you knooow."

"Aah, that's true… Eh? No, you're jumping into something completely different here."

She sure surprised me… What's with that sudden Boson Jump[12] in the topic? Well, it most certainly was almost Christmas though. When I told her, Isshiki pouted in a sly, sullen manner.

"I'm not jumping into anything. Please listen to me properly!"

"That's right, Hikki."

For some reason, Yuigahama had sullen cheeks as she came to Isshiki's support. Eeeh? Was I the one at fault here? The way you girls talk was way too special, you know. How could I ever understand?

I gave them a stare telling them I got it already and urged them to hurry on with the conversation. Isshiki started up once again.

"So, since it's about Christmas, it became a talk about holding a Christmas event in conjunction with a nearby high school for the region. It sounded like an event for older people and little kids so…"

"Ooh, what school are you working with?"

"The other school is Kaihin Sougou High."

Haa, with that school, huh… It was a fairly known college prep school near our school. It was a comparatively new school that resulted after three schools were combined together. With the quantity of three schools, it was rather huge in scale, it had luxurious facilities, and the buildings were beautiful. They even had flashy, convenient things like elevators and ID cards for roll call. I wasn't too sure of the details of how it was structured, but they had some sort

of credit-based system with a focus on an atmosphere encouraging leadership, so it should've been a well-received school.

Still, I felt there wasn't anything significant that our schools had in common. It really made me think how unnatural this joint event was.

"…Who's the one that brought up that plan?"

When I asked, Isshiki gently smiled that said nothing, but "oh c'mon, senpaaai" as if I had said something weird. She then answered me with a small, secretive voice that only I could understand.

"The other side brought it up, you knooow. There's no waaay I'd bring it up myself."

"I thought so…"

This girl totally looked like she was underestimating her job. I bet she's a complete bother at work, wasn't she? There was the saying "one man's fault is another's lesson." I thought how I would absolutely not work so I wouldn't be a bother to other people.

Even so, just how did she accept the proposal given her position on it…? I looked at her in resignation and Isshiki continued to vent as if she remembered her anger from earlier, making sure not to drop her "I'm cute" appeal as well.

"If they told me something like that any other time, of course I'd refuse, you knooow. I have plans for Christmas tooo."

"Of course you'd refuse, huh…"

"Your reason's too selfish, you know…"

Yuigahama and I ended up responding to Isshiki's remaining words. I wasn't sure whether she had a strong mentality or she didn't know the meaning of fear… Wasn't her personality rotten second to mine? A considerable feeling of affinity surfaced and if I made the wrong move, I'd probably end up falling for her, so I'd like for her to stop.

But apparently it wasn't that she didn't know the meaning of fear as Isshiki's shoulders dropped and she murmured.

"But Hiratsuka-sensei said to do it, so…"

Oh, I see. So that person was involved after all. Then again, for Isshiki to be even weak with Hiratsuka-sensei meant our affinity was even higher an(ry.[13]

“So we got started, but how should I say this? We just can’t seem to get the ball rolling or something…”

Isshiki actually looked rather depressed this time and her voice didn’t sound like she was joking. It’s not like she was exceptionally hard working and she definitely was underestimating the work of the student council, but it seemed she was still worried about what to do. I should at least praise her for being motivated somewhat considering she didn’t abandon her duty and came here for help instead. In the first place, Isshiki didn’t start as the student council president voluntarily. I was partly to blame for leading her into it. That’s why I had some feelings of guilt and my attitude sweetened up.

“Well, if it’s together with another school, then that’s just how it is. Don’t worry about it too much.”

“I guess sooo?”

As she said that, Isshiki would look at me with upturned eyes while tilting her head with a “riiight?” She’s acting so sly that it’s not cute… I guess this was what differentiated her from Komachi.

In any case, let’s summarize the vague details of the conversation.

It seemed like the very first job chosen for the new student council was to set up a Christmas event as a regional contribution. That would be handled not just by Sobu High, but also in conjunction with Kaihin Sougou High.

This was a lot more difficult than the typical work the student council usually had to handle. Of course, there was the issue with cooperating with another school, but the relationships and positions in our student council have yet to be formally solidified. This baggage was a little too heavy for the rookies.

Considering the timing, could this have been something that was decided well before Isshiki had become president? So this meant that this was the inheritance of the previous generation.

You get that sometimes, you know? The things that were nonchalantly ignored by the previous person in charge. That happened at my earlier part time job. You’d work as you

always would and suddenly, something would pop up like a land mine and it'd get forced onto you despite not knowing a thing about it. On top of that, even if you tried asking your predecessor, the person wouldn't be any help because he wouldn't be able to remember anything since it was a long time ago. What was I supposed to do, huh? Thanks to that, I ended up passing it on to my successor when I quit the job without ever bothering with it. That's why I absolutely will not work for the sake of breaking away from this chain of negativity.

Well, my story didn't matter here.

The problem was with Isshiki and that predecessor.

"If anything, shouldn't you have gone to discuss this with Shiromeguri-senpai before coming here?"

Shiromeguri-senpai, the owner of the Megu Megu Megurin ♪ Megurin Power ☆. Shiromeguri Meguri-senpai was the student council president before Isshiki. She was warm and cute. What's with this ridiculous description of her?

The official position of the student council president should've still been in the process of being transferred over. In the first place, it would've been more logical to discuss this with her beforehand. Speaking of which, why was Isshiki here if Meguri-senpai didn't come non? Meguri, Konkon, Koi Iroha?[14] I didn't really call for her though…

When I told her, Isshiki took her eyes off of me.

"Yes, that's true… But there's no way I could bother her while she's in the middle of taking tests right now, could I?"

Meguri-senpai shouldn't have been all that busy because she had a tentative offer for one of the schools she was recommended to though…? Could it be that she wasn't very good at dealing with Meguri-senpai? Well, for someone like Isshiki who created her fluffy airheaded persona, in the presence of the authentic fluffy airheaded Megurin, she probably couldn't handle the brilliance. Those who were authentic always shined brighter than anyone else so they were impossible to reach. I could understand why she'd want to avert her eyes from that reality.

"I only have you senpais left for help!"

After Isshiki's detailed explanation, Yuigahama and I let out a short sigh. Not even an amazed voice came out. It must've been one of those types of sighs.

When we went silent, the peaceful time continued on.

That silence, however, wasn't only because of us.

It was also because Yukinoshita, who to this day would assertively inquire about the details of the circumstances, had said nothing.

Noticing that, I looked at Yukinoshita.

Her long eyelashes were softly lowered and she looked at Isshiki, no, at us with eyes as clear as the surface of a lake.

Instantly, I came to realize what that feeling of discomfort was.

It was that feeling of discomfort that emerged from that feeling of relief when Isshiki came into the room and being relieved afterwards. It was in regards to the fact that nothing had happened when Isshiki and Yukinoshita confronted each other face to face.

What if Yukinoshita had earnestly wanted to be the student council president?

The one who had prevented her from doing so was Isshiki and above all else, me.

If so, then wasn't this request somewhat cruel?

If we accepted the request, then that was equivalent to being a substitute for the student council president.

I still didn't know what Yukinoshita's true feelings were, but I thought that it was really heartless to drop the duties of the student council in front of Yukinoshita. Having something you wanted, but couldn't grab a hold of dangled in front of you was surely nothing but cruel.

Was it really a good idea to accept Isshiki's request like this? As I hesitated, Isshiki's gaze was restless, suspicious of the silence.

"What should I dooo?"

Isshiki looked like she was fully ready to ask for help, but I was curious as to what Yukinoshita was going to say. I wanted to wait for her words, but Yukinoshita didn't give an answer.

But as if sensing the stares from me and Yuigahama, Yukinoshita gently put her finger on her chin and started to think.

"I see… I understand most of the circumstances, but…"

Although she took a considerable amount of time to speak, Yukinoshita didn't give a conclusion and her words were vaguely muddled.

She then glanced at Yuigahama and me.

"What should we do?"

Was this the first time? For Yukinoshita to ask us whether we should accept the request or not. To this day, she would've decided using her own judgment.

If you took that as a good change, then she was making a compromise. However, I felt that wasn't it.

Conversely, Yuigahama's answer was clear.

"Why not? Let's do it."

Yukinoshita gazed at Yuigahama, asking why with only just that.

"I mean, it's been awhile since we've gotten a request, right? I mean, recently, there wasn't anything like this. And we're somewhat free so…"

With Yukinoshita's calm eyes on Yuigahama, her words gradually slipped and slipped.

"That's why I thought maybe we could try our best like, before, or something…"

The words "like before" pulled at me.

Yuigahama probably wanted to use it as a trigger. A trigger that would do away with this atmosphere as we concentrated on handling the consultation and request.

"I see. In that case, I think that's fine too."

However, Yukinoshita's transparent voice rejected that possibility.

Her faint smile that questioned us wasn't a compromise.

This was giving in. A conclusion upon resignation. It was simply a concession that left the issue to the judgment and conclusion of someone else's.

"…No, I don't think we should."

My voice came out on its own.

Considering the state of the Service Club right now, I didn't think the club could do anything. Furthermore, I wouldn't expose the existence of the student council president right before Yukinoshita's eyes. I didn't know what Yukinoshita's intentions were. However, I felt I probably wasn't that far off the mark.

I couldn't let this space degrade any further. We shouldn't be taking any risks.

If I was moving to protect it, then I had to keep doing so until the end. Even if I didn't know exactly when the end was and where the goal was.

Yukinoshita didn't say anything about my opinion and only looked at me while Yuigahama asked for a reason.

"Eh? Why?"

"This is a problem with the student council. Besides, it's not exactly a good thing for Isshiki to be relying on people so much."

"Sure, but still…"

I voiced my public stance on the issue and Yuigahama took a thinking posture while rubbing the bun of her hair. It may be a public stance, but it was logical. It was reason enough to back off.

But there was just one person who didn't seem convinced.

"Eeeh? What's with thaaat?"

Isshiki started complaining. Well, I knew this was coming.

“We’re not the do anything club. At most, we only just lend a hand. We’re not sub-contractors who take up full-time projects. Being a subcontractor is super troublesome too. Know about the subcontract act? Not that I do. Anyway, you’re the one who should do it Isshiki. Got it? C’mon.”

I urged her to stand up as I responded vigorously and I stood up as well. From there, I pushed her along to the entrance of the room, sending her back to where she came from.

While Isshiki unwillingly went along with my zone press, she didn’t forget to throw in begrudging words.

“It’s because of what Senpai said that I became president, you knooow. I want you to do something.”

When she said that, I got weak.

It was natural that I took responsibility for Isshiki. She became the president because of my actions after all. So that being the case, I was the other person who had to take responsibility along with Isshiki.

That’s why what I would do was already decided.

I drove Isshiki out the room and I followed suit as well.

I closed the door with my hand behind me and took a few steps away from the room. I then turned around to the incessantly dissatisfied Isshiki and let out a small sigh.

“…So I said all that earlier. But do you mind if I help you?”

“Yes?”

She looked like she didn’t understand what I said very well. Isshiki looked slightly doubtful. Well, I did refuse her quite forcefully earlier. It was reasonable for her to have that reaction. That’s why I slowly explained it to her.

“I’ll help you personally and not as part of the club. So this is without the help from Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. I think I should be able to do that if it’s like that.”

While listening to my explanation, Isshiki’s eyes narrowed as she hummed while thinking, but quickly nodded.

"…Well, that's fine too. Actually, if it's just senpai, then it'd be a lot easi…, it'd be more of a relief or more reliable."

No, you didn't have to correct yourself, okay?

"Okay, we're good then, right?"

"Yes!"

When I checked her with one last time, Isshiki energetically responded back.

In any case, I'll try to do what I can. Of course I had doubts about just how much I could do, but well, I should be able to at least follow up on what Isshiki did.

Isshiki might look a little dumb with a quick glance, but it's not like she wasn't smart. Although, if she just did her job properly without relying on us, then I'm sure she'd start looking like a student council president too I think…

Aah, that's right. Something came to mind when it came to relying on someone. Thinking back on it, I recall including a secret measure that Isshiki accepted when I was convincing her to take on the president position. But it didn't seem be in use right now. Before getting to work, I figured I'd ask about that.

"Actually, what happened with Hayama? This is the perfect time to ask him for help, no?"

When I asked, Isshiki blushed slightly and looked away from me.

"…It's actually really troublesome so I thought maybe I really shouldn't bother Hayama-senpai with it after all."

So you're okay with bothering me instead…? Well, whatever.

Still, for her to say something admirable as not wanting to bother someone, Isshiki Iroha-chan was a proper maiden in love, huh? I couldn't help but be impressed.

But right after I was impressed, Isshiki cackled with a devilish smile.

"Besides, wouldn't it be cuter if I messed up somewhere than look like I couldn't do something super easy? If it's something really annoying, normally speaking, people would think more critically of you, you knooow?"

“Aah, I see…”

Hnnnn, this girl really *does* have a wonderful personality doesn’t she…? Give it back! Give back my admiration! Rather than a devil, she’s a full blown demon. Ogre! Demon! Editor!

The little devil i r o h a didn’t pay any attention to me who was in ruined mood at all as she quickly jumped into the problem.

“Okay, senpai, let’s meet at the front gate after this. I’ll be right over there.”

“Eh, we have to start today…?”

When I said that, Isshiki had an apologetic face.

“I’m sorry, there isn’t that much time left…”

For there not to be much time left meant that the plan should’ve made some considerable progress so Isshiki had been trying her best since the beginning. In the end, she did decide to come to me for help, but she definitely did what she could with her own strength. There was no way I could criticize her for that.

“…No, that’s fine. But change where we meet. It’s a little embarassing to have rumors floating about us walking home together amongst your friends…”

“Huh?”

Isshiki had a serious expression. Umm, I guess because she’s in a different generation that it’s not getting through, huh? She didn’t make a face saying “senpai, there’s no way you had frieeends” but a rather serious one instead. She then let out an astounded sigh.

“Well, that’s fine… Do you know where the community center near the station is? That’s where they’re having the meeting. We can meet there.”

“Aah, over there, huh?”

I had passed that numerous times on my way to station before. I recall there being a day service nursery there. I see. So “for the region” meant that it would accommodate the older people and young children there. It’s likely on the day of the event, it’d be held there.

Well, I’ll confirm the other details here and there later. For now, let’s leave the school.

“Got it. I’ll get ready and then head over there.”

“Okay. That being the case, I’ll be in your care.”

Isshiki grinned and bowed. That’s what I mean by being sly. Jeez.

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I walked Isshiki to the next corner of the hallway and returned to the room. Now then, I needed to make some preparations before going to the appointed place.

When I opened the door to the room, Yuigahama and Yukinoshita looked my way.

“What happened with Iroha-chan?”

Yuigahama asked and I parroted the words I had prepared.

“She was complaining a lot, but it looked like she was convinced.”

“I see…”

Yuigahama looked a little dejected somehow as she dropped her shoulders. And then, Yuigahama continued little by little with a small voice as if checking with Yukinoshita.

“It’s just… I thought it’d be kind of nice if we finally did something after such a long time…”

“Well, something should come up eventually.”

If that time came, how would I answer then? Not knowing the answer to that, I ended up saying something random.

When I did, Yukinoshita let out a considerably short sigh.

“…It might actually be better if we didn’t get a request. It’d be better to just pass the time peacefully.”

Yukinoshita gently shifted her eyes to outside of the window. The dim dark red sky should have been reflected in those eyes.

“…Maybe.”

I managed to answer to Yukinoshita’s fleeting voice. In order to not drag that out any longer, I quickly added in succession.

“It doesn’t look like there’ll be anyone else coming today.”

“I suppose so…”

Yukinoshita answered and closed her book. It looked like she saw it as a sign to call it a day. After I confirmed that, I grabbed my bag.

“I’ll be heading home then.”

“Ah, I guess we should call it a day.”

As we had that conversation, I turned around and left the room ahead of Yuigahama and Yukinoshita who were noisily getting ready to head home.

It was something that I had realized a long time ago. It wasn’t necessarily always correct to reach out. There were things that would result in the worst possible outcomes even if you thought what you did was the right thing to do. There were things, from time to time, where you couldn’t take anything back or redo anything.

In that case, what was it that I...

What in the world was it that we had been doing up until now?

Chapter 2: Without issue, the congress dances[15], yet it doesn't progress

The community center where Isshiki and I were set to meet was rather close to our school. It took no more than a few minutes to get there by bike.

Truthfully, I've yet to step foot in the community center. But since I tend to see it quite often in my everyday life, I didn't have any problems finding it.

Immediately next to the station was the large business MARINPIA (aka: MariPin). When it became evening, the sight of many housewives from the neighborhood would stick out. And amongst them were students. Thanks to MarinPin being in the area, it was a suitable place for high school students to stop by and have fun on their way home. In the same way, I would occasionally stop by the book stores, arcades, and even the batting centers.

When I arrived at the community center, I parked my bike in the bike parking area.

I took restless glances around the area briefly, but Isshiki was nowhere to be found. Well, it's not like we specified an exact time when to meet.

If this was going to happen, maybe we should've come together at the beginning…

But there was no other way except to meet off-campus to keep the fact that I was helping out Isshiki by myself from being disclosed to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. To accept a request connected to the student council right now in front of Yukinoshita was a cruel thing to do. That being said, it would be irresponsible to outright reject Isshiki's request. There was also the choice to exclude Yukinoshita, but that felt like a terrible betrayal. Considering how the Service Club was at the moment, choosing to take on this request as a personal favor should've been the best choice of action.

I reconfirmed my conclusion in my head and sat down on the forming stairs near the entrance of the community center.

I sat there in a daze and coming out from the convenience store on the other side was Isshiki. In her hands were seemingly heavy bags. Upon noticing me, she trotted up to me.

"I'm sooorry for making you wait. I had to do a little shopping…"

Isshiki let out a breath as if the convenient store bags were heavy.

“…No, that’s fine.”

As I answered her, I turned towards Isshiki and extended out my hand. When I did, for some reason, Isshiki softly avoided my hand and looked at me fixedly. She tilted her head unsure of the meaning behind what I did.

“Huh?”

“What’s with that irritated face of yours? Wasn't that your appeal to have me hold the bags for you because it was heavy just now?”

Hearing that, Isshiki rubbed her hair and softly averted her gaze from me. Her face was slightly blushed as if she was surprised or confused.

“Haa… Aah, no, I was just being myself there…”

Ah, that’s right, huh? In her case, she tended to see guys only as laborers so I ended up thinking that was the kind of appeal she was doing. See, it’s just like how Tobe naturally became the errand boy.

Isshiki froze up for a moment, but she suddenly poised herself with a sudden realization and took a step away from me.

“Ha! Could it be that you were making passes at me just now, I’m sorry, for an instant that made my heart skip a bit, but now that I think about it rationally, it really wouldn’t work out.”

“Aah, I see…”

Just how many times will I have to be rejected by this girl…? Even her rejection was becoming a hassle now…

Still, if that was enough to make her heart skip a beat, then she had better be careful because she wouldn’t even be able to go on trips peacefully. There’s no way your heart would skip a beat while the flight attendant onee-san on the plane carried up your luggage. It wouldn’t, right…? No, it definitely would (flight attendant correction). No, wait. It didn’t have to be a FA since a blue-collar onee-san would make your heart skip a beat too… As expected, women with physical careers were wonderful! (aspiring house husband correction).

“Well, whatever.”

I wholly ignored what Isshiki said and snatched the bag out of her hands.

“Ah… Thank you very much…”

Isshiki squeezed the sleeves of her cardigan and vigorously bowed her head. Thanks to that, I couldn’t get a grasp of what her expression was like, but her unexpected, polite words of gratitude made me feel embarrassed.

“…It’s fine. It’s just a part of my duties.”

If she was insistent in expressing her gratitude every time for something like this, eventually, she’d end up adopting Komachi’s habit of saying “thank you so much onii-chan, I love you”, darn it. My intention was to tell her indirectly not to make a fuss out of it, but in the next instant, I quickly regretted it.

“Waaa! Sooo reliable! If that’s how it is, then I’ll be counting on you next time ♪.”

She linked her fingers in front of her chest and suddenly made a radiant smile.

Aah, the luggage felt like it got heavier all of a sudden just now… Still, what’s in here anyway?

Since the bag was heavier than I was expecting, I found myself peeking into the bag and inside were an assortment of snacks and juices. Well, for a conference like this, it was common to have things like tea-cakes and catering.

When a conversation shriveled up, people would fill the silence temporarily by eating their snacks and drinking their tea. It resembled the situation where you made a dry “haha” laugh in the middle of a conversation and took a FRISK immediately right after. Once they did that, you couldn’t help but assume “aah, this person’s completely at a loss when talking with me…”

By the way, if someone who wasn’t even talking suddenly offered, “do you want a FRISK?”, it was a sign that he was indirectly saying “your breath smells”! Be on your guard! There’s a chance he might have an internal disease! Of all things, that’s the thing to watch out for?

Well, still, the selection of snacks was rather difficult as well. Snacks that were loud and had a strong odor could conversely be a bother. That being the case, I peeked into the bag to see what Isshiki bought.

Fumu. Light-sized chocolate snacks, fruit flavored throat candy and soft rice crackers… Yep, this wasn't a bad selection. All of them were in their own wrappers so this earned a lot of points too. With this, you wouldn't need to prepare plates and the sort and you could also avoid dirtying your hands. On top of that, it wouldn't be too much of a hassle to deal with once it was time to go home.

"Hooo, you're surprisingly considerate, aren't you?"

I asserted, slightly impressed, and Isshiki made a vexing, swollen expression.

"What do you mean by 'surprisingly'…? I'll have you know I'm a very considerate person. Well, the other side also prepared some too though."

"Oh. Do we even need this then? All the expenses will be on their side anyway. Why not just eat all of theirs instead?"

"We can't really do that…"

When she answered, Isshiki's expression hardened.

I see. Indeed, it looked like she really was being considerate in various ways. If the other party had prepared something, we couldn't just come empty handed every time. It was basically something like that.

It was actually more bothersome to be this considerate in the case where we were invited as complete guests. But as long as the two sponsorships of this union regarding this event were of equal standing, then they had to at least maintain this equal relationship even if it's something simple as bringing in snacks.

Having to work along another school was a rather troublesome issue. Since that would extend into the actual work as well, the question of how it would influence things made it feel like the bags in my hand got one level heavier than it did before.

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Invited by Isshiki, I proceeded into the community center.

At any rate, I never really visited the community center before, so what exactly was it that you did in here? Did they recover your community with the Ten Ten Terorin ♪ BGM or something, I wonder? What monster center was that?

Once we actually entered, the inside resembled a government office with the cold, peaceful atmosphere continuing on. It was an atmosphere that made you think twice about shouting out with a loud voice. The library that was on the first floor may have been the reason for that.

I followed Isshiki to the second floor and the atmosphere changed slightly. The sound of people talking and music could be heard.

The stairs continued further up. There was music coming from the third floor.

“What could they be doing, I wonder?” As I thought this, I looked up the stairs and so did Isshiki.

“There’s a big hall on the third floor. It looks like they’ll be holding the Christmas event up there.”

“Hooh…”

It looked like there was dance of the sort or a club in the middle of their activities up there evident by the tremors coming from the third floor.

Fumu… Basically, this was the same thing as those government community centers. It was an establishment where the locals would gather for various activities and events. So, how was this any different from government community centers? The scale?

I wasn’t too familiar with the establishment so I restlessly looked around. Isshiki who advanced further ahead was stopped in front of the door to a particular room.

Above the door was written “Training Room”. It looked like they rented out this room to hold the conference.

Isshiki knocked on the door.

“Yes, please come in.”

When a voice called out from inside, Isshiki took a small breath and then placed her hands on the door.

Upon the opening of the door, a clamor of voices poured out the room. The presence of desks and chairs made the room feel like a classroom at school.

“Thank you for your hard work.”

Isshiki gave her bubbly-like greetings as she went into the room first. Even after I followed her in, there weren’t any signs of the chatter dying down. On top of that, not a single person directed their gazes at me. Everyone was seemingly engrossed in their own conversations that they had no particular interest in me.

But it looked like Isshiki was properly recognized as a voice coming from the group called out to her. On closer inspection, the one who called out to her with a raised hand was a boy wearing the Kaihin Sogo High uniform.

“Iroha-chan, over here.”

“Aah, gooood evening.”

Isshiki waved her hands while she headed towards that group. I naturally followed right after her. When I did, now that I was in front of him, the boy that called out to Isshiki looked at me with a puzzled expression. He then quietly whispered into Isshiki’s ears.

“Who’s this?”

“Aah, one of our helping workers!”

That’s one crude explanation for how big your grin was, wasn’t it, Isshiki? But even with that kind of introduction, the boy let out an impressed “ooh” and turned towards me.

“I’m Tamanawa. I’m Kaihin Sogo’s student council president. Nice to meet you!”

“…Ah, nice to meet you.”

Suddenly given an erratic, prompt introduction, I dillydallied over whether I should give my name as well to which Tamanawa didn’t seem to mind as he continued on.

“I’m really glad we could plan together with Sobu High. I was thinking about how we need to form a PARTNERSHIP that’ll bring about a SYNERGY effect where we both can RESPECT each other, you see.”

…Don’t start off with such a good punch, maaan. Half of what he said went through one ear out the other, but it looked like Tamanawa was the one who organized this Christmas event conference. I realized it from select words he was saying.

Because of Tamanawa’s position as the student council president of Kaihin Sogo High, just talking to him caused the people nearby to shuffle into the conversation. In that time, people introduced themselves, but, frankly speaking, I couldn’t remember all of them. Well, once this event was over, we’d never meet again, so it wasn’t necessary to commit any of them to memory.

Just having to face so many people was pretty tiring. I reflexively breathed out a sigh. I left the rest to Isshiki, sat in a seat further away and watched Isshiki and the others.

When I did, my eyes met with the eyes of an individual who had a perplexed face in the mob of people. The person blinked in surprise after seeing me. And then that person stood up and came my way.

“Oh, Hikigaya?”

“…Oh.”

When my name was called by a surprising person, I was startled and responded late. Unknowingly, a drop of sweat ran down.

That girl’s Kaihin Sogo High uniform was slightly crumpled and she was combing through her black perm with her fingers.

Orimoto Kaori.

She was a classmate from middle school and also the girl I confessed to long time ago. Just recently, we had an unexpected reunion and then I was thrown into an unexpected situation. What happened long ago and just recently weren’t very pleasant memories.

Speaking of which, Orimoto went to Kaihin Sogo High, didn’t she? The fact that she was here meant she was involved in the student council, huh…?

That suspicion was also held by her as well it seemed. She let out a surprised voice.

“Hikigaya, you’re in the student council?”

“No…”

When I answered, Orimoto nodded convincingly.

“Aah, I see. Then I guess we’re on the same boat. I’m here because a friend invited me, you see.”

As she said that, Orimoto peeked behind me and looked around restlessly. Was she looking for something?

“Hikigaya, are you alone?”

“Yeah, the same as usual.”

After I answered, Orimoto snorted and burst into laughter as she held her stomach.

“What the heck, that’s super hilarious.”

“No, no it isn’t…”

There’s nothing hilarious here… Besides, I wasn’t the one taking it! Nor was I the one giving it![16]

Still, thanks to Orimoto, I had a slightly better grasp of this group. Although this was an event conference between the student councils of the two schools, Sobu High and Kaihin Sogo High, it looked like even volunteers were participating.

“Isn’t your side, like, missing people? Is it just ours that has a lot?”

“Who knows…?”

Seeing that today was my first time here, I wasn’t too aware of the situation in the room. But when I looked throughout the room, Kaihin Sogo High had just about ten people. On the other hand, Sobu High’s side had…

Huh? Our student council was… Aah, there they were. They’re huddled together in the corner over there. The number of people other than me and Isshiki wearing their uniforms

was one, two… four people, huh? On top of that, unlike the guys from Kaihin Sogo High, ours looked dwarfed in comparison. It looked kind of shameful.

“You’re right, there isn’t that much of us…”

“Duh, you can tell from just looking… Well, not that it matters.”

When she said that, Orimoto looked like she lost interest and quickly left my side to her original place. Isshiki returned as if she tagged in. Isshiki fixedly stared at Orimoto closely and slipped out.

“Senpai, there was someone you knew?”

The way you’re saying that sounded like you’re actually saying “you had someone you knew?” Let’s stop that okay, Irohasu? Also, you, you’ve seen her at least once before, haven’t you? Well, she probably didn’t remember because she was so far away at the time. At first, I was a little unsure about how to go about explaining it, but thanks to that, I was able to shoot out the usual answer in the end.

“Yeah. Well, just a classmate from middle school.”

“Heeh…”

Although Isshiki inquired about her, she didn’t look particularly interested as she sat down and began spreading out the snacks that she brought. Seeing that, the people from Kaihin Sogo High began preparing their snacks and drinks as well.

It looked like the meeting was going to start up any minute now.

Both the Kaihin Sogo and Sobu sides went to their designated seats. Everyone sat at their seats lined up around the C shaped desk. Now then, which corner should I sit at…? Protecting one of the four corners made me seriously think I was one of the Four Holy Beasts[17] or so I thought until my sleeves were pulled on.

“Senpai, please have a seat over here~”

“Eh, I’m fine with just the corner…”

Despite saying that, Isshiki wouldn’t let go of my sleeves. I tried to pull away from those hands that had me caught, but Isshiki continued to hold onto them. What’s with this

strength? The way she was holding onto me was so cute, but I couldn't even pull away at all…

"C'mon, c'mon, it's going to start, you knooow~"

She pulled on my sleeves even more.

"Okay, okay. You're going to pull them off."

Well, regardless of where I sat, I wasn't going to say anything anyway, so it'd be the same in the end. In that case, the seat with snacks right in front of me would serve me well. I reluctantly gave in and sat next to Isshiki.

Although it was a C shaped desk, directly in the middle was the birthday seat occupied by the Kaihin Sogo High student council president, Tamanawa. We, Sobu High, were sitting in the right half of the desk.

And when I took another good look, just as Orimoto said earlier, the other side had a lot more people. As far as numbers were concerned, they had two times the people, but it felt like there was even a bigger difference in the substance of their numbers. The prime reason probably had to do with their noise levels. The girls and boys on the Kaihin Sogo High seemed lively while the Sobu High side was dead in comparison.

Well, seeing that the other side was the one who suggested the idea, the difference in motivation was something that couldn't be helped. I suppose it's something like between those who were the organizers and those who were the supporters. This disparity was clearly demonstrated in the seating order.

Judging from the situation, it looked like the power balance was tipped in favor of Kaihin Sogo High with them as the main for various things while Sobu High was designated as the supporting side.

When the president of the other side, Tamanawa, confirmed that everyone had taken their seats, he clapped his hands.

"Eeerm, we will now begin the conference. I look forward to working with you all."

He spoke looking like he was used to it and everyone bowed their head.

Finally, the conference had begun.

Tamanawa called to one person in his group of teammates who moved to the front of the white board. As the sound of the pen pushing down echoed, Tamanawa opened his mouth as he watched with a sidelong glance

“Similarly to last time, let’s do some BRAINSTORMING.”

Eh, what the heck? That’s so cool. I can’t use that kind of skill though?

Or so I thought for a moment, but he was actually just referring to BS. There were various set definitions, but it basically meant that a group of people would freely throw out their ideas.

“The topic of discussion will continue from last time and we’d like some IDEAS regarding the CONCEPT and content of the event…”

As Tamanawa continued on with the business, the Kaihin Sogo High side began raising their hands one by one, respectively giving their thoughts on the matter.

I observed them for a while. I mean, see, it’s basically that. Giving your ideas when you didn’t even have a basic grasp of the situation would just end up being a bother. It’s not like I was trying to cut corners or skip out, I was just being considerate!

Someone on the other side said this.

“If we consider the demands towards us high school students, we definitely have to make INNOVATIONS in the areas concerning the MINDS of younger people…”

Fumu, I see. Good point.

Again, another student over there spoke up.

“In that case, that obviously means we’ll have to think of forming a WIN-WIN with the COMMUNITY side as a prerequisite for sure.”

O-Okay. Well, I get that.

Once more, another person from their side spoke up.

“If so, then we’ll probably have to put strategic consideration into the COST PERFORMANCE. So we’ll take a CONSENSUS on that…”

Y-Yeah… Right.

As I watched them quietly to that point, it suddenly hit me.

…What's with this conference?

Not only did I have no absolute clue about what they were doing, I had no idea what they were even talking about. Could it be that? Was it because I was an idiot that I didn't understand, I wonder?

As I anxiously thought, I looked at Isshiki sitting next to me and she was nodding her head while letting out a "Whoa…" with an impressed voice. You know it? Phone[18].

It'd be bad if I was left behind even though I was here to help, so I quietly confirmed with Isshiki.

"Isshiki, what're they doing right now?"

When I whispered to her, Isshiki slightly rotated her head my way. She cutely tilted her head.

"Eh…? Who knows?"

"Who knows?", don't tell me you… What are you, the table tennis player, Ai-chan?[19]

This girl, she didn't understand a single thing and she still had that kind of reaction? I looked at her with a shocked face, but Isshiki didn't seem to pay it any attention. Her light smile said nothing but "don't wooorry, it's all fine."

"Well, the other side's giving out all their ideas."

"Hoohm…"

So if the other side did all the thinking, then our side only had to put everything to action… Well, in that case, just me alone would be enough it seemed.

I didn't hate simple hard work. Mechanically repeating the same task endlessly eroded the spirit, but my spirit was already completely far off the deep end, not to mention shameless to boot. If I didn't have to be considerate of others and I could avoid using my head, then that was paradise in its own way.

Mmkay, then I better listen to what's going on so I could at least do what I needed to do. But it felt like their conversations lacked any kind of substance to it though…

Regarding that point, Tamanawa who was leading the conversation looked like he felt the same way.

"Everyone, isn't there something more important…?"

When Tamanawa uttered with a heavy tone, chills ran through my seat. As expected of being the student council president, his magnificence was something to behold. Everyone gathered their attention waiting for what he would say next.

And then, Tamanawa glanced around the entirety of the Training Room and made slightly exaggerated hand movements that seemed like he was turning a potter's wheel and spoke out.

"We need to use LOGICAL THINKING when we logically think about things."

Aren't you just saying the same thing? Just how many times are you going to think?

"We need to make a stand on the CUSTOMER SIDE from the view of the customers, you see."

Like I said, aren't you just saying the same thing? Just how many customers are you going to have?

I felt like I had a twitching smile floating on my face. But everyone else had "I see" expressions and was looking at Tamanawa with sparkling eyes.

…That's not good. This president and the others were people that followed the same patterns.

Rather, this was a gathering of similar people or maybe a gathering of people looking to aim for something. The flow of the conference didn't change as it continued on.

"Then we'll have to consider OUTSOURCING as well."

"But with our current METHODS now, it might be a little hard, SCHEMATIC-wise.

"I see. Then, there's the possibility that we may need to RSCHD things."

What the heck is RSCHD[20]? A store with delicious beef tongue[21]? Why the heck have these guys been using katakana[22] so much? Ruu Ooshiba?[23]

An innovated INNOVATION! A discussed and negotiated NEGOTIATION! A solved plan is a SOLUTION! That repetition continued. I thought their ideas weren't HIP – HOP because their consciences were clearly HOP – UP instead.

Fueee… My conscience was so hiiigh up… It felt like my poor, little conscience was ascending high up somewhere…

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Where did we come from and where were we going?[24]

It was a conference where that thought suddenly came to mind. Where in the world did this conference come from and where was it heading?

The conference eventually came to an end with no decision resembling a conclusion.

But BRAINSTORMING was typically something like that. A BS was typically something where you threw out a variety of ideas. It was held with the objective of making progression. As such, this conference itself may not have been that near useless after all.

There was one point that slightly caught my attention and that was how most of the suggestions came primarily from Kaihin Sogo High. Although present, Sobu High for the most part didn't say anything. Well, if the things earlier like "highly conscious proclamations" were repeatedly thrown out, then being nervous was reasonable. Even the president Isshiki didn't look like she was going to say anything either.

And speaking of that Isshiki, she seemed to be chatting up a storm with the president of Kaihin Sogo High.

At the moment, I didn't have anything to do, so I watched Isshiki in a daze a little far off. When I did, Isshiki noticed me and cut the conversation at an appropriate spot and approached me.

"Senpai, did you get a good idea of what's going on?"

“Not at all… I don’t have a single clue.”

Isshiki was probably asking me whether I had understood what was discussed in the conference. I was aware of that, but regrettably, I could only say a placeholder because it would’ve been odd to say I had actually understood what was going on.

Presuming how I felt in my expression, Isshiki let out a short sigh.

“Aah, they are saying a bunch of difficult stuff after all.”

Well, it’s not so much that the words were difficult, but that it was too vague, making it really hard to understand. But that difference was trivial to Isshiki as she made a poppy smile.

“But when I say “amaaaazing” and “I better try my beeest too!”, they really seriously take it. After that, I just have to reply to the mails every now and then and it’ll be okay for the most part.”

“Someone’s going to stab you someday…”

It may not be now, but at some point she’s going to severely suffer from the karma backlash and that made me worry. Really, unpopular guys tend to be pulled along too easily, so all sorts of poor tragedies would come about… Unpopular guys tend to be strangely pure with a one-track mind and because of this honesty, they tend to misunderstand easily. What the heck? Thinking about it again, unpopular guys were totally great guys! Why weren’t they popular? What a mystery!

As I thought that, Isshiki groaned seemingly thinking about something.

“…But senpai, you give off that feeling sometimes, you know? Like how you would seem like you’re smart or how you’re one of those overly conscious types.”

She had a half smile as she said that. Right after the overly conscious type was a (lol) attached…

“Don’t group me with them. I’m not an overly conscious type. I’m an overly self-conscious type.”

Overly conscious types (lol) were, well, basically the people who strongly appealed to others with the intention of showing they were grown up. They were a group of painful kids who

used the most appropriate business and management lingo terms to demonstrate how capable they were compared to others. It wasn't all that different from chuunibyou.

On the other hand, overly self-conscious types were just normal painful kids. It wasn't all that different from kounibyou.

"Haa, I don't really get it."

Isshiki answered tiredly. Well, I didn't get it either. Regardless of either, the common point of both being painful to look at didn't change.

"Anyway, now that we worked out what we needed to do, shall we get started?"

Isshiki quickly presented a stack of papers.

I see. So what she was doing earlier wasn't just a friendly chat, but she was asking about the details of what our side, Sobu High, that didn't bring up anything during the conference would do.

Occasionally, there were times when holding a conference was meaningless. Nothing important gets decided on at the conference because most of it would get decided behind the scenes by the more important people which were common occurrences.

She was particularly tactful in that area herself. She was a cute first year girl and she was treated quite well.

"You got pretty close to them."

"Mm. Well, I guess so."

Isshiki placed her index finger on her chin and groaned as she tilted her head. She then let out a "aha" with a smile.

"…Wait! You're the one that taught me that, senpai. That a younger girl looking to be taught was cute."

"I don't remember teaching you that…"

True, I did teach her how to take advantage of the merits of being in her position, but I don't remember telling her anything that specific. No, if you were to explain it the Isshiki

way, then that's how it'd turn out… Not good, did I accidently give birth to a monster? This would definitely lead to a circle crash[25], huh…

"But, well, in that case, then you could just leave it up to them then. You don't really need me, right?"

"Aah, um, that's actually…"

When I asked, Isshiki looked down, reluctant to answer. She looked like she had something worrying her as I waited for her to continue. But that never happened.

That was because there was someone tapping on our table.

"Hey, Iroha-chan. Can I ask you to do this too? I took care of the bigger portion already."

The one who appeared was Kaihin Sogo High's student council president, Tamanawa. It looked like he had some additions to the content they talked about earlier. He handed Isshiki a few more printouts.

"Ah, ookay!"

Isshiki took it in good graces. Not a hint of her downfallen face from earlier was shown.

"I'll leave it to you. If there's anything you don't understand, just let me know. I'll teach you how it works."

Tamanawa made a fresh smile as he waved his hands and left the area. Isshiki waved back and saw him off.

"Okay, shall we get working then?"

She turned back to me, reorganized the added printouts, and began handing them out to the other student council members nearby.

"So that being the case, our work here is to record and organize the minutes of the conference. Okay, I look forward to working with you."

Even though she spoke to them as she distributed the work to each person, the response was weak. The difference in motivation was staggering compared to the other lively student council.

Well, being even remotely motivated towards a job was odd anyway. No, that logic itself was odd.

But seeing that our job was just to break down what was given to us by the other party, I could understand why our student council didn't want to get on board with it. That's because the student council that they envisioned was completely different from the current reality.

I also took some of the printouts of the minutes as well. There were other things like the plans in the future and a checklist of topics. It looked like our job for now was to brush these up.

We all did our work in silence.

As we did, one of the members of the student council quietly stood up and handed a printout to Isshiki.

"President, is this good?"

"Ah, let me take a look."

Isshiki with the paper in hand had a stiff expression somewhere. The boy in question spoke up as if he wanted to say something.

"Aah, about this…"

"Yes…"

"No, then again, never mind…"

The faculty looking boy swallowed up his following words and looked away. He then said "thanks" in a small voice and returned to his seat.

When I followed him with my stare wondering if I had seen him somewhere before, Isshiki noticed this and told me with a secretive voice.

"He's the vice president."

When she told me, I realized it. Aah, a second year I think… Then again, I didn't know his name, but I think I've seen him before on the same floor. So he was our vice president huh?

You could be aware of the president's name but this wouldn't apply to the others since their popularity wasn't as significant.

Still, the same year as me, huh? That explains why Isshiki was being polite.

Fumu. Quite complicated, I'd say. The subordinate being older in age made him hard to work with, but the superior younger in age wouldn't let you feel at ease. Even at my convenience store part time job, the new employee who was older in age was really hard to work with… You'd be considerate while teaching the job to him and the other party would be bothered about something too.

Even for Isshiki who was adored by people older than her for having trouble with things, it looked like it wasn't any different.

"Seems pretty tough for you."

"Aah… I guess I'm not too well liked. But it's always like that at first. We'll get used to it eventually, right?"

Isshiki's expression shook for just a moment. But immediately, she made a provocative smile as she said that.

Well, true, everyone getting along smoothly at the beginning was difficult. Usually there were just some things and opinions that wouldn't ever see eye to eye.

However, there existed possibilities in growing from that. If it's at the very beginning, there would be things you could change. At the very least, it was different from being shut in a room together somewhere.

"Senpai?"

When I was spoken to, I quickly raised my head. When I did, Isshiki's puzzled face as she looked at me was there. It looked like my hands had stopped working. I jumped right back into writing in order to brush off the strange pause while speaking.

"Even so, just how long are we going to be doing this?"

"I suppose so… It's almost time for us to head home, I think."

When Isshiki followed up, I looked at the clock near the entrance of the room. It was just about time. It was also just about that time for clubs to start heading home as well.

The door under the clock then opened up.

“Oh, working hard.”

The woman in a suit with a white coat who came in speaking was Hiratsuka-sensei. As she flicked away her long black hair, she approached us with the noise of her heels clacking.

“Sensei.”

Why was this person here…? As I thought mysteriously, Hiratsuka-sensei let out a dissatisfied sigh.

“For the most part, this was a job entrusted to me again… Good grief. Being given all the work because I’m young sure is a problem.”

I suppose so. Sensei was young, after all… Unintentionally, I looked at her with gentle eyes. When I did, Hiratsuka-sensei looked at my eyes as well. Somewhere, there was a hint of kindness in them.

“…Are you alone Hikigaya? Where’re Yukinoshita and Yuigahama?”

From her tone, she assumed that if I was here, then the other two from the Service Club would be as well. Aah, speaking of which, Isshiki mentioned that Hiratsuka-sensei was the one who told her to do this, didn’t she…?

In other words, Isshiki’s request was something that she planned on getting the Service Club to accept. True enough, if things were like they were before, then this request would’ve been accepted by the Service Club as a whole.

However, it was different now.

“Aah, no, I’m helping out here as a personal favor.”

I moved my eyes back to the printouts at my hand.

“Fumu…”

Hiratsuka-sensei looked at me as I worked and didn't say anything for a while. I didn't explain anything further and moved only my hands. The only thing I did was mechanically copy over meaningless sentences and words on to other papers.

"…Well, that's fine."

Hiratsuka-sensei let out a short sigh and alternated looks between me and Isshiki.

"Still, Hikigaya and Isshiki, huh…? A rather interesting pairing."

"What's that about…?"

Being stuck together wasn't that interesting to us. But Isshiki looked like she thought the same way as she made a slightly dissatisfied face while groaning. Aren't you being a little mean, Irohasu…?

Hiratsuka-sensei looked at our faces and amusingly laughed.

"Oh no, it's nothing… Anyway, it's about time. Leave the rest for next time and head on home. The other side seems to be doing so as well."

Being told that, I took a look and the people from Kaihin Sogo High were getting ready to leave one by one.

"I guess so. Why don't we get going too?"

When Isshiki said this to every other member, every individual started to clean up. Isshiki then lowered her voice in consideration of Hiratsuka-sensei. She spoke to my ear in a quiet voice.

"I'll be eating with the people from the other student council and going home after that. Senpai, you can go home first."

There wasn't the choice to invite me, was there…? That's a load off my chest. She sure understood well.

"Okay, I'll be heading home then."

"Yes. I look forward to tomorrow as well, senpai."

Isshiki made a silly bow again as she answered while lightly waving her hands and I headed for the door. And I didn't forget to ask one more thing.

"Aah, right. It's okay to assume that tomorrow's going to start around this time as well, right?"

"Well, it's the standard."

"I see. Got it."

The time was probably designated at a specific time since they anticipated it would take some time for the Kaihin Sogo High students to get here. In that case, for us in particular, there was plenty of time before the beginning of the conference.

As I thought about how I would spend that strange amount of free time, I left the community center.

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What is happiness, dare I say?

That would be the kotatsu.

"Ah, onii-chan. Welcome baaack."

With the long day over, when I made it back home, in the living room was Komachi. She had drowsy looking eyes. It looked like she had been sleeping quite a bit.

And the reason for why she was sleeping was because of this kotatsu that was brought out into the living room at some point.

At long last, it was revived… This demonic mechanical contraption. The kotatsu was a device that produced good-for-nothing people. I could even propose we send out kotatsus to all our enemy nations during the winter season because we'd easily be able to conquer them.

"Komachi, don't study in the kotatsu. You'll just get sleepy and you'll catch a cold when you fall asleep. The kotatsu turns people into good-for-nothings."

When I told her briefly, Komachi stared at me sarcastically. Dear me, oh my. Could she be in her rebellious phase right now…?

“Wait, that’s not something you should be telling me while you’re getting comfy in the kotatsu…”

Hahaha, just what are you saying, Komachi-chan? I’m not getting comf… Oooh! I was already in the kotatsu before I was even aware of it!?

Just kidding. I enacted out that worthless little play as I entered the kotatsu.

…Mfmmeoow.

With the long day over, the far infrared rays felt comfortable to my body that was chilled from walking home in the cold, night streets. When I stretched out my legs, my feet hit against something soft.

When I did, that soft something wrapped itself around my leg. What could this soft something with a mind of its own be…? Now then, could it be Komachi’s legs? I looked at Komachi and when our eyes met, Komachi returned a grin.

To think she’d want to tangle our legs together under the kotatsu… Recently, my little sister’s been a little unusual[26]. Actually, what was this? This was so embarrassing…! This darn pampered girl.

I pushed back against her to tell her to stop. When I did, the soft feeling went away.

And then, something came crawling out from under the kotatsu. It was our cat, Kamakura. Apparently, it wasn’t Komachi who was wrapped around my leg, but this fellow. Just why did cats tend to use your legs as a pillow, non?

When Kamakura left the kotatsu, he stretched and let out a long sigh. Was it that? Was this guy an old guy who just came out from a sauna or something?

When he looked at my face, he snorted. He must’ve been dissatisfied from being driven out from the kotatsu by my stretched legs. Or maybe it was because my feet were smelly… That made me worry, so please stop with that reaction, okay…?

“Onii-chan, you’re staring awfully hard at Kaa-kun. Is something wrong?”

“Nothing at all…”

Even though Kamakura came out from the kotatsu, apparently it was still cold as he hopped onto Komachi’s legs in the loaf position and started to sleep. All he did was sleep in the afternoon, yet he was still going to sleep more? Being a cat sure was nice. I want to live that kind of lifestyle too.

Komachi began petting Kamakura as he slept on her legs. Aah, no matter how much time passes, whenever I did that, he'd just go somewhere else…

Er, that's right. Looking at Komachi made me remember.

"Heeey, Komachi-chan. What could this be, hmm?"

I took out the letter that was still in the breast pocket of my uniform. Komachi leaned over to look at it without waking Kamakura. She then calmly spoke.

"Eh? It's exactly as you see it."

"Hoh…"

She really wanted a house appliance…? Just what was my little sister?

Komachi looked like she didn't feel like explaining any further and hummed as she petted Kamakura.

…Well, if I pressed any further, that message on the letter would come up and it'd be really embarrassing. I'll use the list just as a reference when I think of different presents to get for Komachi.

We both spent the time silently in a daze without making much conversation.

Suddenly, Kamakura stood up. He scratched his ears with his back legs and made a posed expression as he left the living room. He then went towards the entrance.

Apparently, our mother was home. Kamakura was pretty amazing when it came to meeting mom and Komachi when they got back. By the way, he would never greet me and my dad at the entrance at all.

In just a moment, the sound of the entrance opening could be heard. The sound of footsteps echoed as they climbed up the stairs and in the living room appeared our mother. Behind her was Kamakura.

"I'm baaack. Aaah, so tired."

My mother put her bag in that area and blew on the coffee she either bought on her way back or from some café. Komachi and I greeted her tired appearance appreciatively.

“Welcome back, mooom.”

“Aah, good work. Where’s pops?”

If pops was home too, then I thought I could demand some money from him for Komachi’s presents, but my mother had a surprised expression.

“Who knows?”

“What’s that about?”

HEY, HEY, MY MOTHER? YOU are MY FATHER’s WIFE[27], aren’t you? Don’t you think you should be a little more respectful towards him? Or was it because you had no interest in your husband?

“During this time of the season, he can’t really come home since he’s just barely scraping by with his schedule, maybe? I came home with my work too.”

Our mom said so completely natural without trying to smooth it over. Rather than having any interest, it was more like it was a very natural thing that she didn’t pay it any attention. Hohmm, it varied depending on the type of industry, but office workers during this time of the season were quite busy, weren’t they? There’s no way I could handle working when it was nearing Christmas, seriously. I wanted to be an adult who would spend time with his family during the Christmas season. I will definitely not work. As I strengthened my stubborn will, my mom spoke up when something came to mind.

“Right, Hachiman. You’re free, aren’t you? Reserve a party barrel[28]. Also cake.”

“Ahn?”

Why do I have to? Then again, it’s not confirmed that I’d be free though? My “ahn” response was that in a nut shell. There wasn’t a single “okay” to be found anywhere.

“I usually ask Komachi to do it, but this year might not work out so well…”

“Aah, sure thing. Give me money.”

If that’s the reason, then I was all the willing to do it. Up until now, I was never really too aware of it, but when I was a test taking student, Komachi probably did quite a bit for us

too. Actually, Komachi did most of the house chores anyway. At a time like this, I should at least do it.

When I answered, Komachi broke in.

“Komachi can do at least that much though?”

But for some reason, our mom had a half smile while she waved her hands.

“That’s okay. Our job’s already forcing onto you a lot of responsibility as it is, Komachi. At least let onii-chan do it.”

No, wrong. That’s wrong. I had plenty of motivation to do house chores. But that’s only whenever I thought “I’ll do the chores”! At that point, they would all be done already[29] (by Komachi’s hands)

Having a competent little sister was a blessing and a curse was an excuse I was going to give, but my mom didn’t look the least bit interested in my reaction as she took out her wallet from her bag.

“Ah, I forgot to withdraw money. Is next time okay?”

“Sure.”

After I shortly replied, my mom said thanks with a sigh, cracked her shoulders, and left the living room.

As Komachi watched her tired back, she slipped out a few words.

“She doesn’t even need to worry about Komachi too.”

“Well, it’s just parental love. Don’t worry about it and focus on your studies.”

When I said that, Komachi squinted for an instant. But to play it off, she had a strained laugh.

“Mmm, saying that is just a little bit…”

“Ah, no, my bad. Couldn’t think of anything else to say…”

I reflexively told her to try her best with her studies, but from the perspective of a test taking student, it was phrase they were absolutely tired of hearing. Besides, there was no way, Komachi, my idiotic little sister could be slacking off.[30]

Telling someone to try their best when they were already doing it wasn't something you should do, I suppose. In the first place, being told that by someone who wasn't trying hard would just be irritating instead.

So how could I cheer her on then? As I moaned, Komachi smiled.

"Onii-chan, you just need to say 'I love you' at a time like this."

"I see. I love you, Komachi."

"Komachi doesn't feel that way, but thank you, onii-chan!"

"So mean…"

A sudden tear drop fell from my eyes. Just now, onii-chan put a lot of heart into it too. I even flashed the brake lights five times too[31]

Komachi smiled amusingly for a bit and then she stood up. It looked like she was going back to studying in her room.

"Okay! That was a good change of pace."

"I'm glad for you…"

"Onii-chan, changing your pace's good for you okay? Like, if you get driven to a corner, it'd be better to distract yourself with something else, you know?"

"That's… Well, yeah, that's right."

That's just an excuse to run away, wasn't it? I tried to say that.

However, when someone somewhere who averted his eyes in that same way came to mind, I was unable to say it willfully.

Chapter 3: Repeatedly, Hikigaya Hachiman questions himself

I let out a big sigh in class after school.

Today as well, I had to attend the meeting at the community center in order to assist Isshiki after this.

I didn't really mind the act itself all that much.

Although having to participate in that meeting was a drag, currently, it was entirely managed by Kaihin Sogo High. Thanks to that, it was a situation where we only did the things we were told. With vigorous discussions left and right from the BS, motivation was high. I should add that our consciences were also high.

The one thing that caught my attention was Sobu High's student council. Judging from how they were yesterday, it was hard to say if Sobu High's student council was functioning properly.

And the biggest cause of this was the feeling of distance between Isshiki and the other members.

A president that was a first year was surprisingly bothersome. It was only a one year discrepancy, but to us high school students, that was rather big. They would act tactfully around each other, but that tactfulness and consideration were things that obstructed their interactions.

It'd be nice to do something about it, but it was a problem with Isshiki and the others. It wasn't about whether I could do something about it. Even in that club with only us three, there wasn't anything I could do either.

Besides, given the current circumstances, it wasn't that big of a problem. They just needed to do something until Christmas.

It was a student council that just recently started up. Eventually they'd give up and then they'd get used to how they were originally.

With those thoughts so far, I let out another sigh.

There was still plenty of time until the start of the meeting. In the meantime, I would be in the club room.

My assistance with Isshiki was wholly kept secret from Yukinoshita and Yuigahama, so I had to at least show my face at the club. If I suddenly took some days off, it wouldn't be very good to have them be suspicious of me.

It was a club room with nothing in it. Avoiding putting anything further into it should've definitely been the right thing to do.

Still, after showing my face at the club, I had to go do some mysterious work afterwards, huh…? As far as the club was concerned, it's not like there was work to do, but standing by was also part of the job. It might've actually been pretty troublesome.

The acquired Reality Marble "Unlimited Double Works: Infinite Side Jobs" had been activated at some point unknown to me… It's like I was about to begin this odd double life or something…

When I let out a small sigh, I stood up abruptly from my seat.

Yuigahama was already gone from the classroom. It's not like we could go to club together every time. We probably both had the mutual belief that we would show up to club. It's been like that to this day and it would continue from here on out.

I left the classroom and walked down the hallway to the special building.

I was sure that it was getting colder and colder day by day, but it was hard to feel the absolute difference from two days ago to a day ago.

There wasn't that much of a change in the chilly hallway I was walking through right now from yesterday. If you lived your life normally, you usually wouldn't perceive the timing in which the freezing late autumn would transition to winter.

That's why the room further ahead down the hallway actually felt much colder than it was yesterday. It's just that I never noticed it.

I put my hand on the door and entered the room.

"Ah, Hikki."

"Yo."

As I lightly greeted Yuigahama and Yukinoshita, I sat at my seat.

I quickly looked around the room.

Yukinoshita returned her eyes to her book and Yuigahama stared at her cellphone. As I thought, there wasn't anything noticeably different from yesterday.

The chair near the window. From there was the chair that confusingly maintained a neutral position. And then, diagonally from the chair by the window was the chair that was facing away from the others.

The other chairs were stacked on top each other together with the unused desk.

On the desk were the light blanket of dust and a tiny stack of finished books which slightly told the passage of time in this room.

Yuigahama talked to Yukinoshita and had their typical exchange. As I lent my ear to the meaningless conversation, I took out my book.

This was the usual scenery played recursively these past few days.

The feeling of discomfort was nowhere to be found. There wasn't anything that could be called a change.

Only my gaze would move up with my upper body, shoulders, and neck unmoving. I snuck a glance such that it wouldn't look like the time was bothering me.

Just how many times have I repeated this? The long hand of the clock that wouldn't proceed as I wanted finally ticked to the position that I hoped for.

The two were enjoying themselves in their conversation with the topic being different from just a moment ago. There was an energetic voice that talked out and a calm smile. After confirming that, I slowly let out a breath.

"Aah, right… Do you mind if I leave early today?"

As I said that, I quietly closed my book. When I did, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama stopped their conversation and looked my way.

"Huh?"

Yuigahama looked out the window as if checking the time. Evening had come slightly earlier. If it was like always, then we'd continue to stay in the room.

As if remembering a feeling of discomfort from that, Yuigahama asked with a mysterious expression.

"You're leaving rather early today, huh! Do you have something to do?"

"…Aah. I was asked to reserve a party barrel."

The first reason that came to mind spilled out of my mouth. In reality, I was asked to do it, so I'll stop by KFC on the way back home.

When I answered, Yuigahama nodded convincingly.

"Haa, a reservation, huh?"

"Yeah. It's for Christmas at home. It's actually pretty popular so it looks like I'll need to do it as soon as possible. Apparently Komachi did it last year too."

"I see. Komachi-san's in the middle of tests, after all."

"That's exactly it. Anyway, I'll see you later."

"Uh huh. See you tomorrow."

Yuigahama called to me as I stood up. Yukinoshita added a "give my regards to Komachi-san" as well. I waved my hands to them and left the club room. Behind me was Yuigahama who started to talk about various things regarding Komachi's tests.

In the soundless hallway partitioned by a single door, the thin sound of speaking voices could still be heard. I reluctantly left the place behind as well as those voices.

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After I left the school building, I immediately headed for the community center.

I locked my bike in the bike parking area. After several steps, I readjusted my bag that wasn't all that heavy over my shoulders.

When I walked up to the entrance, there was the sound of footsteps approaching me from behind.

"Seeenpai!"

Along with the voice was a light strike that hit my back. But even without turning around, I knew who it was. There was only one person who would call me senpai aside from my little sister Komachi who would also do this kind of thing. It could only be Isshiki Iroha.

"Yeah."

I answered as I turned around and the owner of the voice was Isshiki Iroha as expected. Isshiki puffed her cheeks in discontent as she lightly glared at me.

"Isn't your reaction a little too weak…?"

"I mean, you're just too sly, mmkay…"

Besides, I was used to this because of Komachi anyway…

"Oh c'mooon, that's just me being honest with you, duuuh."

Isshiki pressed on her cheeks with one hand and acted shy. Really, you didn't have to go through the trouble of doing that so slyly… When I looked at Isshiki's hands, Isshiki was holding a bag with snacks and pet bottles today as well.

I extended out my hand wordlessly indicating to her to hand it over.

Isshiki had a slightly surprised face by my suddenly extended hand, but after a chuckle, she handed over the bags. She then spoke teasingly.

"Then again, I think you're being pretty sly there yourself, you knooow…"

"Oh c'mooon, that's just me being honest with you, duuuh."

Wasn't that dreadful? My onii-chan skills ended up being activated automatically. If this got me conscious, it'd so embarrassing that my hands would start sweating. Ah, I was conscious of it already so now my hands were suddenly sweaty.

As we had that kind of conversation, we entered the same Training Room that we were in yesterday. Already gathered inside was everyone from Kaihin Sogo High and Sobu High.

"Ah, Iroha-chan."

"Thank you for your hard wooork."

Kaihin Sogo's student president, Tamanawa, raised his hand and called Isshiki. Isshiki responded to him as she made her way to the same seat she was in yesterday. I followed right after her.

It looked like we were the last ones to arrive. Everyone shuffled to their seats and focused their attention on Tamanawa.

"Okay, shall we get started? I look forward to working with you."

After his call, the conference began.

First, Tamanawa checked with the minutes that we created yesterday. He pressed, pressed, and pressed[32] on his Macbook Air. He looked like he had tired eyes as he squeezed his brow. He then spoke up.

"Hmm, there's still just a little more that needs to be certain, so let's continue the brainstorm from yesterday."

No, it wasn't as simple as "a little more". I didn't understand a single thing that was discussed in that conference yesterday. Because of that, the minutes were absurdly abstract.

"It'd be nice if we could write some proper minutes today," I thought that as I lent my ear to the details of the conference.

The one who started the conference was Kaihin Sogo High.

"Since we're going to be doing this, it'd be nice if we could make it a little flashier."

“That’s it! That’s totally it. I mean, we definitely should do something big or something.”

I turned my head to the familiar sounding voice and Orimoto was leaning forward, approving of the idea. When she did, Tamanawa had a complicated expression as he stared at his Macbook Air.

“…True. I think we might’ve settled on too many small scale things.”

Eh? Really? We were? A look at the minutes and the only thing I could see recorded was a bunch of LOGICAL THINKING strategic considerations though?

Could it be that they decided on something without me knowing? I grew slightly anxious and spoke to Isshiki next to me.

“Hey… I’m not really sure what you guys are trying to do here…”

“…Well, that’s because nothing specific has been decided yet.”

Isshiki had a resigned tone when she replied in a small voice.

As for what had been decided as of now, the only things were the date, the location, and the objective.

The date was on Christmas Eve. The location was the big hall in this community center. The objective was to hold a Christmas event that targeted the kindergarteners at the nearby nursery and the seniors who commuted to the day service as a form of volunteer activity with the goal of regional contribution and cultural exchange.

But the crucial details had yet to be finalized.

The direction of the discussion right now should’ve been the concept behind those details. But, well, it didn’t feel like that at all though.

Tamanawa finalized most of their opinions and asked Isshiki.

“That being the case, I’d like to expand the scale of the event. What do you think?”

“Mmm. Let’s seeee.”

Asked for her opinion, Isshiki made a perky smile as she mumbled vaguely. Tamanawa seemingly had the same opinion as he returned a smile.

A slipped sigh could be heard close by. When I took a sidelong look, the sigh originated from our vice president.

Agreed.

Regardless of how trivial our task as a helper was, there was a problem if more work was forced down our throats. This was where we should firmly object.

“Isshiki, we don’t have enough time and people to be increasing the scale of the event.”

It wouldn’t be of much use if someone like me who at most accounted for one person’s worth of work had said it. My intention was to whisper it to Isshiki who was our representative to have her say it instead.

But Tamanawa seemed to have overheard it.

“NO, NO. That’s not it.”

Tamanawa combined considerably exaggerated body and hand gestures as he began to speak in a tone that not only I could hear, but everyone else as well.

“BRAINSTORMING is, you see, where you don’t reject a person’s opinion. Because of time constraints and personnel shortages, we can’t expand it further. In that case, we want to figure out how we can address that. That way, we can easily move forward with the discussion. We have to quickly come to a decision. That’s why your opinion is no good.”

R-Right… So you say, but just now, you instantly rejected my opinion though…

Tamanawa faced me with a fresh and nice guy smile.

“Let’s talk about how we can make it possible!”

So increasing the scale was set in stone, huh…?

Not a single voice raised an objection to Tamanawa’s suggestion. Then again, thanks to his speech earlier, there wasn’t any room for dissenting opinions.

After that, the conference turned into a discussion on how to approach increasing the scale of the event and the exchange of opinions that focused on the implementation of said approaches.

“Maybe we can involve the regional COMMUNITY somehow.”

“In that case, we should do it so we can bury the generational GAP.”

For the time being, I was recording the minutes, but the proposals that made me wonder whether I should take a memo of them or not continued.

“What if we had a nearby high school join in?”

Another new opinion came from Kaihin Sogo High. Hey, hey, what was it with these overly conscious types (lol) being so fond of working together with other people?

Could it be they were watching a dream where their conscious was so high that they ascended to the higher dimensions and as a result, they became a part of the Data Integration Thought Entity[33], I wonder?

Still, there weren’t any merits to including another high school. We were already having issues managing ourselves even now. Increasing the output of opinions of other people would just make it harder to keep track of them all. There’s no doubt the workload would increase too. I had to avoid that at all costs…

But a simple objection would be shot down. What should I do to keep that from happening?

…No choice then. The only way to give an objecting opinion was to say it in a roundabout fashion that conformed to their rules. If that’s the case, it most certainly would be difficult to have Isshiki to say it as my proxy since it’d be too long.

“This is just a FLASH IDEA, but as a COUNTER to the suggestion earlier, I’m thinking it’d be better to expect the best SYNERGY effect from two schools forming a close relationship and their coordination instead, but what do you think?”

With this, I could ask him what he thought about it while mixing in some katakana lingo in there. A commotion occurred when an unexpected person suddenly spoke up. Diagonally opposite of me was Orimoto who stared at me blankly.

But the one I was dealing with was just one person.

As I thought, the katakana lingo loving Tamanawa took the bait.

“…I see. Then, it’d be better if it wasn’t another high school then. Like a college or something.”

No gooood, huh? Damn it. At this rate, it’ll become a hassle to try to take CONTROL of things. I should pursue further here.

“No, wait. If that’s the case, we won’t be able to take the INITIATIVE. Even if we got our hands on STAKEHOLDERS and a CONSENSUS, we would need a PARTNERSHIP where we could have an UNBLURRY MANIFESTO that would allow us to make transparent SUGGESTIONS…”

“Senpai, what in the world are you saying…?”

Isshiki had an appalled face. Well, I didn’t even know what I was saying myself. MANIFESTO was completely random here too. But right now, that was the only way to say it.

Although I did say it out of desperation, thanks to the high percentage of used katakana lingo in my speech, Tamanawa was nodding his head.

“True. Then…”

Good, good, it looked like Tamanawa was going to be convinced this time around. What did you know? This guy was the type to listen once you talked to him. He’s a pretty good guy. Did I end up destroying his argument again? I wish to know defeat[34].

In the moment that I thought that, Tamanawa raised his index finger.

“Then, how does the nearby elementary school sound? We might be able to include a different audience aside from us high school students.”

“…Huh?”

What was this guy blabbering about…? Unable to respond to his sudden proposal, Tamanawa tacked on another opinion. It looked like he was really interested in his proposal.

“Hmm, something like GAMEDUCATION? By doing it that way, we can make it fun to work and we could garner the help from the elementary students in the region.”

“That’s a WIN WIN, huh?”

Someone from Kaihin Sogo High agreed with the idea. When that person did, Orimoto clapped her hands and pointed.

“WIN WIN! That’s it!”

What’s “it”…?

Not only was it Orimoto, but the others agreed as well. Tamanawa nodded convincingly and began leading as if the matter was settled.

“Our side will handle the APPOINTMENT and NEGOTIATION with the elementary school. After that, I’d like to ask the people from Sobu High to handle the rest.”

He smiled as he said that to Isshiki.

But Isshiki had an ambiguous attitude as she replied “hmm”, not giving a clear yes or no answer. In the first place, Isshiki was on the side that had no motivation to work. She probably had a negative impression of the idea of having the workload increased. That was likely correlated to her hesitation.

“How about it?”

But Tamanawa pressed her on.

“…Okay, I understaaand.”

With a sudden perky, fresh smile, Isshiki answered.

Well, not much she could do. To Isshiki, the person she was dealing with was a boy older than her and also the student council president of the other school. It wasn’t something she could easily refuse. It was likely that this was the form in which their opinions were forced on to them.

With this, our increased workload was set in stone.

Another sigh from the vice president could be heard again. I wanted to sigh too. It’s just sighs all the time!

But simply being given more work was quite the annoyance.

Even if it was one or two pointless jobs, we had to bet on the possibility that we could lower the amount of work. If it's for the sake of not having to work, then I didn't hate the amount of effort it would take to do so…

"Hey, is this something we can just decide on our own?"

"If anything, wouldn't it mean something if we were able to put our INITIATIVE into action?"

Tamanawa answered my question as he flicked away his bangs. Talking with this guy really made my head hurt… I squeezed my brow as I talked.

"That's not what I mean… Even if we had the elementary kids help out, that also meant we would need guardians to participate as well. At that point, we'll have issues regarding the CAPACITY of the hall."

The community center was designated as the meeting place in the early stages of this plan. That was something that couldn't be changed. If that was the case, then there was an upper limit to the number of people who could participate in this event. You couldn't go around inviting someone or some guy however you pleased.

When I explained, Isshiki nodded.

"Aah, that's right. We won't know how many people from the nursery and day service will come after all…"

That wasn't confirmed…? I felt there were plenty of other things that had to be done before thinking about increasing the scale, but even so, Tamanawa wouldn't yield. He factored in our opinions and reinforced his own.

"Hmm, that means we'll have to confirm it then. Also, it'd be better if we contacted them in advance. After that, we'll decide on the number of participating elementary students and contact them."

For now, what we would do was decided.

Sobu High and Kaihin Sogo High would check with the nursery and day service respectively. After that, we would check with the elementary school.

Well, it couldn't be helped … We managed to secure a limit on the number of participants. I should at least be relieved that I didn't have to deal with an endless group of people.

That's right, Hachiman! No matter the time, you have to find the good things!

The conference, which started off as a brainstorm, ended and we all quickly went to our designated jobs.

"Um, so what should we do?"

Isshiki gathered the student council and me and started up.

"We have other work too so I'd like to determine who should go to the nursery and who should stay to do the minutes or something…"

Fumu. Well, since it's just to confirm information, then there wasn't a need for everyone to go all at once. The number of people who should go should be as small as possible. The problem was who would go… Honestly, this really wasn't something that needed to be discussed.

Before I was about to say something about that, the vice president spoke reluctantly.

"I think it'd be better if the president handled the negotiating…"

"Ah, aah, yes, I see. I suppose so…"

When she said that, Isshiki's shoulders dropped. Well, the representative going was the correct decision here. What Isshiki should be doing right now was not deciding who would go, but delegating work to the remaining staff members.

The vice president seemed to be thinking the same thing as he added with restraint.

"Yeah… No, it's not just limited to this. There are various other things too, I think."

"Haa… I suppose sooo."

The vice president sighed at Isshiki's attitude.

--Aah, so his sigh during the conference was that, huh?

Unlike me, the vice president wasn't upset about the increased workload.

The primary reason had to do with Isshiki.

I see… It truly felt like a subcontractor in the worst sense of the word.

The members of Sobu High's student council including the vice president sought from Isshiki Iroha to behave like a student council president.

But the person in question, Isshiki, was considerate towards the other student council president who also forced his opinions onto her from beginning to end. In addition to that, her being a first year also contributed to the Sobu High side acting reserved as well.

From the perspective of our members, they probably didn't mind it so much as they just wanted to have some work to do.

Well, it was in people's S a g a[35] to mind something once they were told not to mind it. For now, they'd have to work as they were with this odd feeling of distance.

But as long as I was the reason for making Isshiki the president, I held some responsibility as well. I had to make sure I properly supported her during this event.

"Isshiki, I'll go with you to the nursery too. In the meantime, we can leave the rest of the work to the others."

I sent a look to the vice president asking if this was good enough and he nodded. Isshiki who watched our exchange looked slightly relieved as she made a gentler expression.

"Yes. Then we'll go with that. Okay, I'll do a quick phone call."

When she said that, Isshiki pressed on her cellphone and called. Even if it was something as simple as confirming, suddenly intruding on them wasn't something we could do. It was necessary to make an APPOINTMENT beforehand.

As I waited for that phone call to end, I stood there in a daze thinking how much free time I had and in the corners of my eyes was a familiar face approaching me.

Orimoto raised her hand and talked to me.

"Hikigaya, were you in the student council in middle school?"

"Nope, not at all."

We were in the same middle school and she didn't know that? But when I thought about it more carefully, I couldn't remember a single person from the student council at the time either. But on the other hand, being unable to remember them meant they weren't a part of my trauma, so they were probably good people. Forgetting these good people made me somewhat apologetic.

Orimoto searched through her Orimoto memories. She nodded.

"I knew it. But you seem kind of used to it though?"

"That's not really true."

Although I said that, I had accumulated some experience since I was involved in the Culture Festival and Athletics Festival recently. Compared to before, I had built some tolerance to these kinds of jobs.

"By the way, why are you helping anyway?"

"Well, I was asked to."

"Uh huuuh…"

Orimoto slightly paused in response to my explanation. Her staring at me made me slightly uncomfortable. I twisted my body in such a way to get out of her sight and she asked me something outrageous.

"Did you break up with your girlfriend?"

"Haa?"

What was she saying…? When I asked back not understanding what she meant, Orimoto looked at Isshiki who was on the phone a little further away.

"Oh, I just thought you were aiming for Iroha-chan because of that."

Again, what was she saying…? Sure, Isshiki's face was cute, but I wasn't someone that could handle her anyway. In the first place, I didn't think she was the type that would try to do something either.

"I'm not… Besides, I never had a girlfriend so I didn't break up with anyone."

Why did I have to say this stuff to a girl I confessed to a long time ago? Was it that? A new bullying method that transcended time…? Besides, I loved myself that could honestly answer these questions. If this was a Japanese folktale, then I'd be a winner. Ah, not good, I didn't have a dog. I didn't have seaweed either. Wasn't seaweed a different story?

Orimoto blinked in response.

"Oh I see… I thought for sure you were dating one of those girls too."

Which girls were you talking about…? I asked her with a stare and seeing that, Orimoto twirled her raised index finger and added.

"Remember? The ones when we went out that one time."

There was only one time that Orimoto and I went out. That said, Hayama and her friend were also present and it wasn't just the two of us. If I were to say it more correctly, then I was just an extra so the numbers could match.

At the time, in accordance with Hayama's plan, we had an encounter with two girls. They were Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

The girls Orimoto were talking about were no doubt those two.

"They're… just in the same club as me."

Words accurately describing our relationship just wouldn't come out. I wanted to say the truth upfront, but I wasn't sure if that was correct either. Just how much of the meaning of the words "in the same club" did I understand? Just as I was about to go into thought regarding that, Orimoto stopped me with a "heeeh" in a stupid voice.

"So you're in a club. Which club?"

"…The Service Club."

I didn't know how to explain it, but it'd be strangely problematic if the conversation headed in the direction of a lie. When I stated frankly, Orimoto snorted.

"What the heck is that? I totally don't get it! That's super hilarious."

"No, no it's not…"

Orimoto held her stomach and exploded into laughter. Well, it definitely was an incomprehensible club. But it wasn't hilarious at all.

Really, I couldn't laugh at all.

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I followed Isshiki after she finished her call to the nursery. Since it was roughly right next to the community center, making the arrangements was straightforward. Moreover, it being a municipal nursery made it easier for the school's story to get accepted.

By making an appointment in advance, we were able to proceed inside as soon as we arrived.

The spectacle of the nursery that was once branded in my eyes in the distant past and the drifting sweet smell of baby formula gave rise to a feeling of nostalgia.

The classroom, although I wasn't sure whether I could call it that, but everything in the room that I peeked into through the glass window was small. And inside were children playing with building blocks and running around.

On the wall were pictures of incomprehensible drawings in crayon hung like scribbled words. And decorating around them like paint were tulips and shooting stars made from colored paper.

I was also an alumnus from a nursery as well, but my memories of that time were quite fuzzy. During that time, there was the possibility that I was told something like "Zawsze in love"[36] and given keys and a locket, but unfortunately, I couldn't remember at all.

I let out an impressed "ooh" partly due to my intense curiosity as I restlessly looked around and my eyes clashed with the eyes of a nursery teacher past the glass window.

That teacher exchanged words covertly with another nursery teacher nearby. Their stares were clearly wary of me. Mmmm, madams, here at this nursery, it's encouraged to deal with any possible problems as soon as you can!

For now, I quickly left that area and called out to Isshiki who was walking ahead.

“It feels like I’m totally not welcome here.”

“It looks that way… Senpai, your eyes are pretty bad, after all.”

Isshiki quickly took a glance at my eyes and spoke. How mean! I even thought you’d take my side too!

Still, even if we had contacted them already, I suppose they’d still be somewhat wary if a boy in a high school uniform appeared. Going along with Isshiki only to frighten the children and teacher was something I shouldn’t do.

“…I think I’ll wait over there actually.”

I pointed to the wall of the hallway that wouldn’t be visible to the children as I told her and Isshiki placed her hands on her hips with a big sigh.

“There’s no helping it, huh? Senpai, I’ll handle things from here then.”

“Counting on you.”

After I said that, I sent her off. It looked like Isshiki would do the talking in the faculty room further ahead. She continued straight towards it.

Even though I tagged along, the matter would be settled with just me uselessly waiting for her.

I checked the area around me wondering how I would go about killing time until Isshiki was done with her discussion. I could easily just sit down in the hallway, but that would serve only to make me look even more suspicious. It looked like I got it backwards when I thought staying behind alone would ease the wariness of the children and teachers.

I guess I can’t do anything, but just stand here absentmindedly, huh…

A long time ago, I once had a part time job that lasted a day for the exhibition of a model room of an apartment complex where the only thing I had to do was continue standing for some number of hours holding an advertisement sign under the blazing sun. For someone like me with that kind of experience, this much was a breeze. I was able to kill about 8 hours by just standing around absentmindedly. It was actually a pretty tough job and there was also the time when I shed a few tears because the various deductions from being dispatched and insurance had me going “woow… my pay’s really low, isn’t it…?”

Compared to then, there was a roof, walls and the time was shorter. Just those alone made me think it was a good environment… Woow, my affinity as a corporate slave's really high, isn't it…?

It was that moment when I was standing there spacing out while going through repetitions of worthless thoughts in my head. The door of a nearby classroom silently inched opened.

What's this? As I thought that, I took a look and a single little girl tip-toed out of the room. The little girl made advances towards the entrance stealthily and began restlessly looking around.

She tried her best to look outside with cute, nimble gestures such as stretching upwards while standing on her toes and jumping up, but once she realized that she couldn't see anything, she disappointingly trudged back.

The little girl's darkish blue hair was bounded by hair ties that split it into two. Her features displayed an innocence that made her look extremely sweet.

When she noticed me, she let out an "ah" and approached me.

After that, she pulled on the sleeve of my blazer and popped open her mouth as she looked up. Not good, was this that? Like how the situation would blow up into something bigger from a report that I called out to her? But then again, we're inside the nursery and there was no one around, so it should be okay, right…?

"…What's wrong?"

At this point, I couldn't really ignore her so I put some effort to speak to her in a calm demeanor. When I did, the little girl pulled on my sleeve further, so I slowly crouched down. After dropping to about her eye level, the little girl spoke with a troubled tone.

"Um, see, Saa-chan isn't here yet."

"Ooh, I see."

What's Saa-chan…? Could she be referring to her mom, I wonder…? Little kids typically tended to pronounce their words incorrectly. When Komachi was small, she'd say oi-chan instead of onii-chan too. For a split second, I thought for sure she was referring to Tora-san[37].

Still, even if I had built some resistance to younger people thanks to Komachi, for a kid this young, I really couldn't remember how to deal with them. I was once that small too. Now then, just how should I deal with her…? For the time being, it'd be trouble if I let her go outside alone. I guess I'll take her to the classroom.

"It'll be just a bit longer until Saa-chan comes. So let's go play over there until then."

I gently pushed her small shoulders and brought her to the front of the classroom. The little girl was unexpectedly obedient as she did what she was told and followed me up to the classroom. Just as I was about to place my hands on the glass sliding door, the little girl pulled on my sleeve again.

"Ah! Um, you see, that's Saa-chan."

As she said that, she pointed at the crayon pictures posted on the classroom wall. I had no clue which picture she was pointing at… Maybe it was a picture drawn by her mom? Still, there was quite a few of them so I couldn't tell which one it was.

"Which one's from Saa-chan, hmm?"

"That!"

The little girl vaguely pointed at the wall. But on the wall were numerous pictures so in the end, I still didn't have a clue. Hmm… Which one could it be, I wonder…?

I crouched down again and met my eyes with hers.

"…Okay, I got it. This one is right. And this one is left."

I raised my right and left hand in succession in front of her and the little girl nodded her head and then repeated the motions.

"Right, left."

"Yep, yep. Okay, raise your right."

When I said that, the little girl energetically raised her right hand.

"Raise your left."

This time she energetically jumped with her left hand. Fumu, it looked like she knew her right from her left. That being the case, I pointed to the wall earlier with the pictures posted.

“Now then, here’s a riddle. Just how many of these are Saa-chan’s starting from the right?”

The little girl’s eyes sparkled as she went “oooh!” to the new game. After that, she began counting with her fingers.

“Ummm…… there’s four!”

“Correct. Very good job!”

As I said that, I lightly patted her head. I see, so that’s Saa-chan… Yeah, I still don’t get it. In the end, I couldn’t figure out which picture it was. But since I accompanied her for a bit, that should’ve cheered her up a bit.

Just as I was about to urge her to head on in to the classroom, a kind voice called out from behind.

“Kei-chan.”

When I turned around, a person I could remember very well was there. It was my classmate, Kawasaki Saki.

The little girl’s face perked up brightly when Kei-chan was called and she rushed up to her.

“Saa-chan!”

After jumping into her arms, Kawasaki affectionately caressed Kei-chan’s hair. After that, she shot me a suspicious stare.

“…Why are you here?”

“Er, well, work…”

In fact, I was the one who wanted to ask her why she was here, but she managed to say it first. She made a discrete look behind me.

“Uh huh… What about Yukinoshita and Yuigahama?”

I knew she was going to ask that. If it was work that I mentioned, that would imply activities of the Service Club. For Kawasaki who had been involved with us before, that was a natural question to ask. However, there wasn't a need to explain the details to her. It's not like she asked about it and telling her the specifics would just be a bother to Kawasaki too. That's why my answer was simple.

"…They're on another job. It's just me by myself."

"…I see."

Kawasaki stared at me and after a short reply, she looked away in disinterest.

"How about you?"

This time I asked her and Kawasaki lightly and caressingly grabbed ahold of the shoulders of the girl who she called Kei-chan. She then mumbled embarrassingly.

"I'm… here to pick up my little sister."

"Hoh."

Aah, so this Kei-chan was her little sister, huh? I'm glad… I thought for a second there she was her daughter…

Still, after she said it and I thought about it, I see. Their features looked rather similar. She definitely had a bright future ahead of her, I'd say. If there was one thing I'd wish for, it'd be for her to be brought up gracefully. That's because her onee-chan's really scary.

As I prayed for that in my head, I looked between the Kawasaki sisters. I wasn't sure how she interpreted the intentions of my stare, but Kawasaki spoke up in a fluster.

"Ah, um, she's my little sister Keika… C'mon, Kei-chan, say your name."

"Kawasaki Keika!"

When she was urged, Keika energetically shot up her arms.

"I'm Hachiman."

As I thought about how pleasant Keika's vigor was, I named myself as well. When I did, Keika blinked her big eyes in surprise.

“…Hachi, man…? Weird name!”

“H-Hey! Kei-chan!”

Kawasaki warned Keika in a panic. Even so, her softhearted tone didn’t change. Unlike her usual self, she gave off a very gentle impression. She was surprisingly quite the older sister. She seemed different from her brocon self too.

“No, I think my name’s pretty weird too, so it’s fine. Still, picking up your sister, huh? Must be rough.”

When I said so, Kawasaki was blunt.

“Not really… Usually my parents do it. It’s just I come on the days when I don’t have prep school.”

“But I remember your place was pretty far, wasn’t it?”

Our middle school districts may have been different, but the distance between our houses shouldn’t have been all that great. Going from there would take about one or two train stops at the most. I wasn’t too sure about the relevant distance was for them to entrust their child here, but it definitely wasn’t in the neighborhood. That point alone seemed tough. Still, Kawasaki spoke in a small voice as she stroked her long hair.

“That’s right, but when we drop her off, it’s usually by car… Right now, the nursery’s limited in space, but this city one is cheaper apparently.”

“Haa, I see.”

She seemed kind of domesticated. As I looked at her admiringly, the bag of things she brought in her hand came into sight. It looked like she came here right after doing the shopping for dinner as there was a leek sticking out of the bag. This made her look even more domesticated.

“I had part time jobs the entire time before so I couldn’t really come…”

“Aah, that did happen, huh?”

“Yeah…”

Kawasaki answered with a voice that was warm and what filled her gaze was Keika. She suddenly directed that gaze at me.

She glanced at me reservedly and looked like she was having trouble trying to say something with her mouth squirming about. It looked like she wouldn't say anything even if I waited for her, but with her staring at me like that, it made me think there might be something after all. It's a bit embarrassing so I'd like it if she could stop…

"…What is it?"

"N-Nothing."

When I asked, Kawasaki shook her head. While she did, her ponytail would swing side to side and Keika would follow it with her eyes like a cat.

I watched as well and down the hallway, I discovered Isshiki.

"Ah, there you are. Senpaaai!"

The discussion in the faculty room must be over. Isshiki was back. If the confirmation and meeting was settled, then our job here was done. I didn't really do anything though.

"…Eh, um, was it okay for me to come back?"

Isshiki noticed Kawasaki and asked me worriedly. When she did, Kawasaki made a quick look at Isshiki. Because of that, Isshiki's body stiffened up like she was scared. Aah, Kawasaki's usually like that so you don't have to be scared, okay? Yankees may have that bad look to them, but they're usually just scary and tend to be very good kids.

Still, if I were to explain that to her, Kawasaki would get angry again. As I thought about what to say, Kawasaki flicked away her hair and turned around. She put her hands on the glass sliding door. After she greeted the teacher, she looked like she was planning to head home.

"…See you."

She turned her upper half, said that and she pulled Keika's hand. Keika squeezed her hand back and made a big wave with her free hand.

"Bye, bye, Haa-chan!"

“Oooh, see you.”

I lightly raised my hand and waved back. Still, what’s this Haa-chan about? Maybe she didn’t remember my name? You have to make sure to properly remember people’s names, okay? Even if you remember it wrong, don’t be random about it and use something like Hachisomething, okay?

As I saw those two off, standing next to me was Isshiki who shifted her look from Kawasaki to me. And then with a confused attitude, she slowly opened her mouth.

“S-Senpai’s acquaintances are kind of unique, aren’t they…?”

I won’t deny it, but you’re actually one of them too, though…

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It was the following morning after visiting the nursery. Once homeroom ended, I did a light stretch.

There was still a residual feeling of exhaustion from yesterday.

It wasn’t like I did anything particularly physically demanding, but that meaningless period of time was mentally draining.

As for what was accomplished, ultimately, we were only able to get an estimate on the number of participants from the nursery and a hearing of some of their requests. Although we made some progress with updating the minutes, we didn’t actually have a meeting.

When I thought about how I was going to spend today in that way again, a rather big yawn came out. I let out a sigh as if to push away the melancholic feeling.

After I wiped the slight tears at my eyes, I noticed Totsuka who was about to place his hands on the sliding door. It looked like he saw my yawn.

Totsuka made his way to my seat and covered his mouth with one of his lightly gripped hands and made an amused smile.

“You seem tired, huh?”

He must've said that because of the big yawn earlier.

I really was tired, but there was no way I could show off my exhaustion to Totsuka. The "exhausted" appeal was on the same level as the "I drank too much" appeal which was downright irritating. Why did that make them popular anyway? I thought that made them look really lame instead. In fact, I think the "I don't drink sake" appeal would definitely be more popular.

As followed from the above, I think the "I'm not tired" appeal would be super effective against Totsuka!

"It's the same like always."

"Now that you mention it, that might be true."

When I joked about it, Totsuka returned a smile. Those sighs that came out earlier wouldn't come out at all this time. In place of that, it felt like pink colored sighs would come out instead. Didn't Totsuka's voice have a 1/f[38] noise effect to it? By the way, I suppose f would stand for fairy…

While the outbreak of negative ions from Totsuka's smile brought about a placebo effect on me, Totsuka readjusted his tennis bag.

"Going to club now?"

"Yeah! Hachiman too, right?"

"…I suppose."

"…?"

Because of the odd pause there, Totsuka slightly tilted his head. I made an effort to make my voice energetic to try to hide it.

"Well, do your best at club."

"Hachiman too. Do your best, okay?"

"Yeah."

Totsuka did a little wave in front of his chest and left the classroom. I returned his wave with a smile. Still, even when Totsuka disappeared down into the hallway, I didn't feel like standing up at all.

I rested my back against the chair and looked up to the ceiling.

And in my line of sight was Yuigahama.

Further away, she was nervously peeking in my direction. It looked like she was waiting for the right timing for when I was done talking.

I moved my body and looked at her with eyes that indicated it was safe to come over here. When I did, Yuigahama awkwardly walked over.

She stood opposite of me and peeked at me with an anxious face.

"…Are you going to the club today?"

When she asked me, words got lodged in my throat.

Did I make Yuigahama worry because I went home early yesterday? When I looked at Yuigahama's face, the words "I'm not going" wouldn't come out. Don't look at me with those puppy eyes… I got it, I got it, I'll go.

"Yeah. Well, I guess we should get going…"

"Got it! I'll go get my bag."

When she said that, Yuigahama retraced her steps back to her seat. I left the classroom first and waited in the hallway that led to the special building.

In the meantime, in that desolate hallway, I thought about the club and the work for the event afterwards.

Right now, the workload wasn't all that big.

But if I considered the plans in the future, then the lack of time became evident. In order to allocate more time to the work, then it might be necessary to open up my schedule.

If so, that meant I'd have to find the timing to say I would take a break from club.

Still, I wanted to avoid doing that if I could. It was probably better if it didn't become the situation where I wasn't present at the club. In that case, ultimately, I had to do what I usually did and that was to call it a day earlier.

As I was thinking, I received a soft shock on the waist. Ouch, what's that for…? I turned around and standing there with an upset face was Yuighama. It looked like she had struck me lightly with the bag in her hand.

"Why are you going ahead?"

"I was just waiting for you…"

As we walked down the hallway that continued to the club room, we repeated the same exchange we had recently. It was the same rehashed pre-established harmony. It made me think naturally that that time would start up again.

If there was a tiny deviation to point out, then it'd be regarding Isshiki's request before and after. I decided to tell Yuigahama about my early excusal today.

"…Ah, about today, I might need to leave early. Actually, it'll be like that for a while."

When I said, Yuigahama nodded once and spoke.

"Helping out Iroha-chan?"

The words she spoke startled me.

"…You knew?"

"Just watching you is enough to tell."

Yuigahama brushed it off with a laugh.

Well, leaving club early alone and looking tired in class would make you think there was something going on, huh? My own shallowness got the better of me. If Yuigahama saw through that, then it wouldn't have been odd for one other person to have noticed it too.

"Does Yukinoshita know too?"

When I asked her, Yuigahama moved her eyes outside the window.

“Hmm… I wonder? We don’t talk about Hikki after all.”

I couldn’t see past Yuigahama’s expression. However, her overly quiet voice made me think she wouldn’t allow for me to press any further about it. Her answer that was left vague reflected the situation we were in. It felt like she was only thinking about how she wanted to avoid saying the few words that made that definite.

From thereon, we stopped talking as we continued down the hallway.

Only the sound of footsteps echoed.

Yuigahama was still looking outside.

I emulated her and looked out the opposite window.

This time of the year where winter was nearing, the sun was already setting even though it was this early. The special building where it was difficult for sunlight to reach felt darker than before.

When I entered the shadows where the sun wouldn’t hit, Yuigahama briefly uttered.

“…Are you going to do it by yourself again?”

Even in this encroaching darkness, I could see her face very clearly. Her sorrowful cast down eyes and the weakly biting of her lips. I even thought that I did all this just so she didn’t have to make that kind of face.

As I tried to push away the squeezing feeling in my chest, I quickly moved my feet forward.

“I’m only doing it because I have something I need to do. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“Of course I’m going to worry about it…”

Yuigahama made a troubled smile as she said that.

When I looked at her smile, the question that one time reared its ugly head.

…Did I make a mistake?

Ever since then, I continued to ask myself that question that I already had an answer to.

I definitely did make a mistake.

The days following the student council election gave weight to that reality. Yuigahama was showing this lonely smile. Yukinoshita stabbed me with those eyes full of resignation.

That's why I had to take responsibility. Owning up to your actions was a natural thing to do.

You shouldn't rely on someone else when fixing your own mistakes. What good would it do to be a bother to them too? To easily rely on someone, make a mistake, and waste the efforts of the trust of that person was something I could only see as a betrayal.

I thought about the actions I needed to take that were grounded based on the correct rules and principles for the sake of not failing any more than I already have.

For now, I had to do away with Yuigahama's needless worries.

"You have other things to worry about other than me, don't you?"

After a small sigh, I spoke up and made a loose smile. I changed the topic fully well aware of how cowardly it was.

"Yeah…"

Yuigahama responded with a small voice and looked down.

As we walked down the hallway of the special building, our feet began to get heavier as if we were walking through coal tar in a body of water.

We walked in a pace that was much slower than usual and eventually, we could see the door to the club room.

Was the door already unlocked? The only one who had that key was just her alone as the two of us had never laid a hand on it.

Suddenly, Yuigahama stopped. I matched with her and stopped as well. Yuigahama's gaze was directed at the room.

"Yukinon, I wonder if she wanted to be the student council president…?"

"…I don't know."

There wasn't any point in confirming that now. Considering Yukinoshita's personality, even if we asked her, she probably wouldn't answer honestly. If she didn't say it back then, she wouldn't say it now. I didn't feel like asking her something she probably wouldn't answer either.

No, it's more like I didn't want her to answer.

At the very least, both she and I wouldn't ever do something like lamenting over the now unattainable past openly. Just how much easier would it be if she could just voice her grudges to me?

It's just that only Yuigahama was the one who could bring up the past that she and I couldn't. She spoke with a voice that was filled with a will and strength unlike the weak one she exhibited earlier.

"…I think we should've taken that request as a club after all."

When Isshiki came with that request, Yuigahama certainly did say something about how she wanted to accept it. She didn't look for a reason then, but to bring it up again meant that she definitely had something in mind. When I looked at her eyes, Yuigahama spoke clearly.

"If it was Yukinon before, then she would've accepted it for sure."

"…Why do you think that?"

"Because Yukinon's someone who tries to go above and beyond. It's like… how should I say this? It's because she couldn't become something that she would try to aim for something even bigger…"

Yuigahama spoke with a passionate tone and confirmed word by word with difficulty.

That was probably why. I reflexively stared at Yuigahama. These crude, but warm words were something very typical of Yuigahama.

Yuigahama choked on her words as if it was because of my staring at her face to face. She then continued confidently.

"That's why I thought maybe it would've been a good trigger or something…"

"I see…"

The things you lost won't come back.

If you wanted to atone for it, then you had to do it with the things beyond that.

The things that you parted with, by losing these things, loss was born. You had to make up for all of them. Atonement was that kind of thing.

The Yukinoshita whom I assumed to know should have been atoning for her own actions. That's why what Yuigahama was thinking may not have been wrong.

Yuigahama had thought that far. Even if she knew that the request for the student council was hard on Yukinoshita, she still thought it a possibility.

What did I think?

I only wanted to keep that room from deteriorating. Didn't I make the choice for the sake of not making that room emptier than it was now? When the realization that my choice was to preserve and satisfy myself stabbed me, I reflexively looked away from Yuigahama.

"…Well, that might be true if she was like before… But now, I'm not so sure."

"Yeah…"

Yuigahama's voice was somehow downfallen. It was likely that even she knew herself that the possibility of that wasn't high.

Yukinoshita's attitude when Isshiki came that time was different from how it was long ago.

It felt like she had lost the tenacity in dealing with requests and consultations.

Even now, beyond the door, she was probably quietly sitting like before as if she had given up on something and as if she had forgotten something.

I finally placed my hands on the sliding door that took longer than usual to arrive at.

When the door opened, I went in first, followed by Yuigahama.

"Yahallo!"

Yuigahama greeted cheerfully and Yukinoshita sitting near the window looked at us.

“Hello.”

“…Sup.”

When we exchanged our greetings, I sat on the chair that no longer moved.

I looked to see how Yukinoshita was doing, but she didn’t look any different from yesterday. If there was one change to notice, then it would be the addition of another book she had finished reading on the stack. It was as if that was like The Children’s Limbo[39].

Yuigahama moved her thumb as she checked her mail on her cellphone. I did the same thing as always and moved to take a book out of my hand until something suddenly came to mind in which I stopped my hands.

There was something I needed to mention to Yukinoshita before we would pass the frozen time. I had already passed it on to Yuigahama, but I had to say I was going to leave early from club for a while or else.

“Hey, do you have a second?”

When I called to her, Yukinoshita’s shoulders twitched. I wasn’t intending my voice to be that loud, but it may have reverberated quite well in this quiet room. Yuigahama straightened her posture as well and looked my way.

Yukinoshita looked at me and stayed still for a moment. She then let out a breath, closed her book, and spoke up.

“……What is it?”

Her composed voice and her intellectual eyes faced my way. I probably had the same face as well.

“Do you mind if I leave early for a while?”

When I said, Yukinoshita blinked two to three times. She then placed her hand on her chin and took a thinking gesture.

“Let’s see, it’s not like we’re particularly busy with anything…”

I waited for her words to continue, but they didn’t seem to come out.

“Well, that’s, you know… I just have some stuff on my plate… Komachi’s in the middle of her tests too.”

My added reason wasn’t at all random. But I just couldn’t tell her the actual reason. It should’ve been fine if I didn’t say it and she didn’t know about it.

“…I see.”

Yukinoshita gently rubbed the cover of the book she had in hand. It looked like she was still thinking. Even if I waited for her to come out with a clear conclusion, it looked like it was going to take a considerable amount of time. But Yuigahama who was watching things unfold continued the conversation.

“…But that might be better, huh? We can’t really do anything for Komachi-chan after all. That’s why Hikki will have to try his best for the both of us too. Right, Yukinon?”

Yuigahama rested her body on the table and then looked at Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita returned a delicate smile.

“…Yes, I suppose so.”

“…Sorry.”

Unknowingly, I was scratching my head as I said that and Yukinoshita lightly shook her head saying not to worry about it. And then, the room was suddenly submerged in silence.

Yuigahama raised her voice as if trying to bury the silence.

“Ah, right. Let’s send Komachi-chan a mail.”

Yuigahama said and quickly went into doing what she just thought up as she began pressing away making a mail.

It formally hit me again. Yuigahama was always supporting this space. This meant that this relationship that would break down to pieces at any moment’s notice was held together by just one person.

An empty and monotonous exchange. Depending on how you wanted to look at it, I felt it was a respectable and gentle period of time.

A world that was guided by a conclusion based on compromise and management. Words were properly exchanged and the parties had acknowledged each other and everyone would present a convincing answer and this would be established as consensus.

Was this really correct? I ended up swallowing that doubt.

In place of that came out an uncomfortably hot breath that left my throat terribly parched. Unknowingly, I was watching the tea set that was no longer being used now.

Chapter 4: That's why, Totsuka Saika holds admiration

After spending time at the club, I shifted gears into working mode at the community center I headed to.

I waited briefly at the entrance for Isshiki to come, but she never showed up even though it was the same time as always.

It's possible that she might've gone inside first. I gave up on waiting for Isshiki and decided to head inside to the Training Room.

It felt quieter than usual inside of the community center. They weren't having their regular dance or whatever circle activities today.

Nevertheless, there were talking voices leaking from the Training Room that we were occupying.

I entered the room after noisily opening the sliding door and most of the talking voices primarily came from Kaihin Sogo High. Contrastingly, the Sobu High side was rather mute.

"Sup."

I gave my greeting and after I put my bag down, I suddenly noticed. Isshiki who I thought had already gone ahead was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Isshiki?"

Upon asking, the vice president sitting nearby had a puzzled face and spoke.

"She's not here yet… She wasn't with you?"

I shook my head in response and the vice president questioned the other members.

"Did anyone hear anything from her?"

"I sent her a mail just in case, but…"

Judging from how she was speaking to the vice president, this girl was probably a first year. She was probably either the secretary or the treasurer. With glasses and braids, she was

wearing her uniform as stated by the school regulations and while she looked like the docile type, she seemed hesitant somehow.

Although she was a first year like Isshiki, it looked like she wasn't as amiable as you'd expect. I had yet to see her actually talk and even just now, she had settled for contacting Isshiki with just a mail. Whether it was by mail or by phone, there must've been a boundary line somewhere, huh? How complicated…

As the girl looked at me and the vice president reservedly in alteration, she sighed as she spoke.

"She may be still at her club."

When she mentioned that, I realized that possibility. Before Isshiki became the student council president, she was the manager of the soccer club. That hadn't changed even now.

If Isshiki was doing the same thing as I did where I'd show up to club, then that meant she may not have been able to check her cellphone. In that case, it may be faster to go get her directly.

"I'll go get her."

"Ah, yeah. Thanks."

The vice president saw me off as I left the Training Room.

From there, I retraced my route back through the path that I just arrived from.

With my bike, it was at best only a few minutes to get to school. It wasn't that time consuming. With the bike making a squealing sound as I pedaled on it, I hurried to campus.

On the moderately wide campus were the baseball club, soccer club, rugby club, and track and field club mixed together practicing diligently like they always did.

Even though the sun was setting, the recognizable group of people was quite bright. I parked my bike near the campus and headed for the group of soccer players hanging around.

As I watched them from afar, the soccer team was split into two teams and seemed to have been playing a mini game.

Isshiki wasn't there, but another girl manager (cute) was and in her hands were a stopwatch and a whistle. She blew on the whistle.

When she did, the players relaxed and walked this way to the side of the school building. Apparently, it was their break time and they were about to rehydrate themselves with their water bottles that they left here.

In that group, I spotted Tobe. Also noticing me, he lightly raised his hand and came my way. What's with you? If you do something like that, people will think we're friends. Stop it.

"Oooh, what do ya know? Ain't it Hikitani-kun? What's up?"

Tobe talked to me in a really friendly manner. I wasn't sure if he was an idiot or whatever, but why was this guy always so over familiar…? It's not like he's a bad guy, so it wasn't too much of a big deal.

Well, good timing. I guess I'll ask Tobe.

"Is Isshiki here?"

"Irohasu? Irohasu is… huh? Not here, huh? Hayato-kuun, do ya know where Irohasu is?"

Tobe looked around for Isshiki, but noticing that she wasn't here, called out in a loud voice to Hayama who was nearby.

Hayama took a towel from the manager (cute), used it to wipe off his sweat, and walked in our direction. Wow, girl managers seriously did give you a towel. If that happened to me, I'd just get needlessly sweaty from getting too nervous.

"Iroha said she had something to do so she left early."

Hayama answered Tobe and Tobe looked at me.

"There ya go, Hikitani-kun."

"I see. My bad, thanks. See you."

It looked like we slipped past each other somewhere. That was a waste of time. I gripped on the handles of my bike, ready to go back quickly and said my thanks to the two.

"Aah, no worries man, no worries."

Tobe lightly shook his hands and said so with a bright smile. But next to him with a cold expression was Hayama.

“Tobe, about the team distribution for the next mini game, take it over for me.”

“Eh? Aah, aye, aye.”

Tobe was suddenly given instructions and he jogged to the fields. Somehow, it looked like he was driven away from here.

It wouldn’t be a good idea to stay here for too long as well. I pushed my bike so I could return to the community center as fast as possible. There, a voice called out to me beyond my back.

“…Do you have a second?”

When I turned around, there was a guy there.

Hayama pulled off the towel wrapped around his neck and as he gently folded it, he spoke.

“Sounds like a lot of trouble.”

I wasn’t sure what he was referring to. I tilted my head, questioning what he meant. Judging from what my expression was like, Hayama made a smile.

“You’re doing a lot of things after getting asked for help by the student council right? Take care of Iroha.”

“What, so you knew?”

I thought for sure that Isshiki kept silent about this incident this time from Hayama.

Hayama made a bitter smile.

“Yeah. She didn’t say anything specific about what she was doing, but she seemed quite busy.”

I see. So this was the complex maiden circuit[40] where she wanted to avoid being a bother while making sure what they were doing was known to others. I totally get it. No, I don’t.

What I didn’t get was Hayama’s attitude.

“Yeah? So if you knew about it, then you should help her out.”

In the first place, Hayama’s relationship with Isshiki was a lot deeper than mine. Isshiki did say the reason why she didn’t ask for Hayama’s help, but if it was the Hayama I imagined, then if he noticed that she was busy, he would’ve mentioned a word or two about lending a hand.

But when Hayama narrowed his eyes and wore a smile on his face, he said something surprising.

“It’s not like she asked me. The one who she asked was you.”

“She’s just using me as much as she can.”

“If you’re asked, you don’t really refuse after all.”

A tone that gently reverberated as if it sounded somehow impressed. But although it may have sounded pleasant to my ears, it also dripped with sarcasm to me. Because of that, my speaking became sharp.

“That’s the kind of club it is. There isn’t any particular reason to refuse. Unlike you, I have free time after all.”

“Is that it?”

“…What’re you trying to say?”

His probing question made me irritated.

Although I returned the question, Hayama didn’t answer with his bitter smile keeping its shape. For how quiet it was, I could hear the loud voices of the other clubs. Even so, the spot that Hayama and I were standing at made it feel like that noise was far away.

The silence stung my ears so I tried to fill it by speaking up.

“…In the first place, you can’t refuse either. It’s not like it’d be because of club too.”

“I wonder about that…”

Hayama turned his face away from me and looked west of the sky.

The lingering clouds were beginning to be dyed in red.

Hayama looked like he was thinking of something as he sealed his mouth shut and returned his gaze to me. Although the evening sun was beginning to reflect on his face, there was a mysteriously lack of warmth to it.

"…I'm not as nice of a guy as you make me out to be."

He then said that with a provoking tone. His cold penetrating eyes glared at me in place quietly.

My voice wouldn't come out.

It was a tone that was layered with a severity despite being so calm. It felt like I had heard that at some point during summer vacation. In the darkness of that night, did he make this very same expression back then?

I stood there without answering and so did Hayama who didn't say anything further.

The only thing we exchanged were our gazes, with not a single other thing being passed between us. Time stopped just like that. Only the incessant voices of the people in their club activities continued which also served to indicate the passage of time.

Amongst those voices was a considerably loud one that could be heard.

"Hayato-kuuun, neeext!"

"I'll be right there."

Tobe's loud voice brought Hayama back to his senses and he replied to Tobe who was inside the court. He then lightly raised his hand to me and began walking.

"See you…"

"…Yeah, sorry for bothering you."

Not bothering to see Hayama off in the distance, I straddled onto my bike. Unconsciously, the feet that I kicked out with had a lot of strength into it.

The revolting feelings towards that attitude that tried to dig for the truth and the following sense of discomfort that I had overlooked something. Both of those planted themselves in the bottom of my stomach to the point that it made me sick.

I felt this lingering feeling of discontent in regards to Hayama's attitude

Did I mistake something in regards to how I recognized Hayama Hayato?

I thought he was a good guy. But I also realize that he wasn't just anybody. That heartless expression he would show for the purpose of having everyone get along. I thought that was the kind of guy Hayama Hayato was.

However, that smile was slightly different. On one side, it was a gentle and kind smile, essentially perfect. But it was exactly because of this flawless perfection that there wasn't a limit to its coldness.

It was something similar to what I had seen before.

As I searched for that answer, while I was pedaling my bike, I had made it to the community center. I locked my bike and just as I was about to go inside, Isshiki had just exited the slightly opposite convenience store. The way she would walk with her head hanging looked awfully slow.

"Isshiki."

When I called out to her, Isshiki raised her head. Noticing me, she shuffled the convenience store bags to two hands and let out a small sigh. She then showed a sweet smile.

"Ah, I'm sorry. Did I make you wait a bit?"

"If anything, I had to go look for you."

"This is where you're supposed to say 'I didn't wait at all since I just got here too', isn't it…?"

Isshiki spoke in a discontent tone as she pouted and I stretched out my hands wordlessly. Seeing that, Isshiki made a sudden smile. The way she smiled looked like she was letting out a small sigh.

"…Today's not that heavy so it's okay."

“That so?”

“Yes.”

Isshiki answered briefly. True, the content of the bags didn’t look like a lot. But the hands holding those bags looked heavier than usual.

“We’re quite late, so we should hurry on.”

After saying that, Isshiki entered the community center. I followed after her.

Isshiki’s shoulders from behind looked slightly dropped compared to normal and her back was slumped over dully.

Aah, the actual person’s motivation had dropped, huh…? As cheeky as she was, she was surprisingly not very resilient.

That’s reasonable. She was probably tired of things since both the event itself and the internal affairs of the student council weren’t very established. For a first year girl in high school, this was a rather heavy situation for her.

But one reason that contributed to that kind of environment was me. There weren’t very many things I could do, but even so, I’ll do what I can to at least provide support.

Although presently, the only thing I could really do was hold those convenience store bags.

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Would something good come out the longer you take on it?

I think as a matter of fact, that question was a never-ending proposal to the people who create things.

“There’s still some left. It should still be okay. Just a little bit more and I can do it…” It was a common occurrence for everything to collapse on top of itself as those thoughts occupied your head. For just the spare time you had left, you would slack off, cut corners, and take things lightly. That’s just how people were. Composure? Just what are you talking about? This is what you call being careless![41]

Even now, the situation had blown up in my face while I was saying “it can still be saved, it can still be saved, Madgascar!”[42]

Today, we were set to meet with the elementary students from the nearby school according to what Kaihin Sogo High had proposed the other day. Not a single detail had been settled on with only the scale swelling up to bigger proportions.

“Let’s decide on things together from here on! I want you to put yourself out there and tell us anything!”

The excessively refreshing Tamanawa greeted the elementary students in that contagious way.

When he did, the elementary students all answered “we look forward to working with you” in unison with their disorderly voices.

As expected, not the entire body of elementary students was participating as only a few were selected, possibly from something like an elementary student council.

Their number was roughly just about ten.

And in that group, I spotted a familiar looking little girl.

Because she looked considerably more mature than the surrounding kids, a single glance was enough to know. With long, sleek black hair, she was somehow exuding a cold exterior.

Tsurumi Rumi was alone, no different from that time during summer break.

When I stared at her fixedly, she looked like she noticed me too as she narrowed her eyes. She averted her gaze and looked at the floor.

That behavior of hers contrasted with the frolicking elementary kids around her and the memories of what I did to her that time surfaced.

It was in Chiba Village during the summer break. I destroyed the human relationships that enclosed Tsurumi Rumi at the school camping trip those girls attended. That also involved pushing the roles of being a villain onto Hayama and the others.

And the result was right before my eyes.

I didn't know if that was correct or wrong. Whether she was saved from what resulted was something only she could decide.

"Senpai, what's wrong?"

When I turned around to the voice, Isshiki was making a curious face.

"…It's nothing."

After I answered shortly, I looked again at Rumi and the others.

It looked like the other girls in that group with her at that camping trip weren't here as well. In other words, I was completely in the dark as to how her present relationship with others was faring. Trying to think any further was just guesswork. In that case, I'll just stop there.

Right now, there were other things to think about. And that would be how to deal with these elementary students at the present moment.

Even though we met with the elementary students, there weren't any particular jobs we could assign to them.

There were also teachers here as well, likely acting as their supervisor, but it looked like they were planning to leave the plans to us high school students. The initial brief greeting from Tamanawa seemed to have won them over considerably.

And speaking of Tamanawa, after his speech, he came up to us and made a refreshing smile.

"Okay, can I leave handling them to you?"

Call them only to leave them… Even if you tell us to do that, the only thing we could do was chat because we had yet to decide on a single thing. On top of that, we couldn't keep the elementary students out very late. The amount of time to work was limited. Something like "frankly, even if we kept them here…" was the situation.

"…Mmm."

In response to Tamanawa's request, even Isshiki made a difficult face.

Still, the fact that he had already asked made it too late for her to say "sorry, can't do it after all". I wasn't sure what Tamanawa may have mentioned in the negotiations, but

leaving it to them made our side obligated to them. Being unable to shut down his opinion during the brainstorm was a painful misstep.

If we were to have a dispute here, the impressions of our two schools, the elementary school, and the plan which was agreed upon by the various institutions would deteriorate. In addition to that, we were already in a deadlock as it was and getting in a dispute would only hype it even further.

If they stood up, then we'd stand down… It was far from being in a bind, every single one of them were witches, witches[43]!

If we didn't know what we were supposed to do, then that would be true of the elementary students as well. Although they were brought here, they huddled in a group looking unsure of what they were supposed to do.

But there was one who stuck out like a sore thumb even within that group.

There wasn't a need to confirm who it was because it was Rumi.

Even when the other kids would talk secretly about this and that, she would stand there without joining in.

The elementary students took sneak glances at us and began to whisper into each other's ears.

"Should we ask them what we're going to be doing?"

"Who will?"

"Rock-paper-scissors?"

"Okay… How many should we play?"

"Wait. First is rock?"

As they continued to talk, they seemed to have forgotten that it was a secretive chat as their voices grew loud enough for us to hear.

There was something like that, you know? The culture where you tried to decide on anything with a game of rock-paper-scissors. It's similar to that black and white mind duel

where you dueled for anything[44] And so, loners who played alone and came out the winner would end up blurting out “okay, winner has to do it~!”. In that case, you should’ve just decided with the majority, jeez. That way, you could just give up. My elementary self was super pathetic.

Well, stories about me didn’t matter here. When I looked at the elementary students wondering what they were doing, there was a surprising result.

“…I’ll go.”

She probably listened to their exchange nearby. Rumi made a small glance and said so. She wasn’t particularly worked up about it, but her calm demeanor seemed to appear overbearing to the other kids. The kids saw Rumi off as they spoke with an unconfident, pressured voice.

“Ah, okay…”

“Thank you…”

Rumi didn’t show a response to their feeble voices as she continued walking to our front. Of course, she seemed to look hesitant asking me, so she called out to the vice president nearby.

“What should I do?”

Despite Rumi’s age, she asked with a rather calm attitude which caused the vice president to respond in a hurry.

“U-Uhhh…”

The vice president worried about how he should answer and he shot me a look.

“What to do?”

“Don’t ask me…”

“Aah, sorry.”

After saying that, the vice president looked at Isshiki. Considering the systematic flow of assigning roles, the first thing to do was to check with Isshiki.

“Isshiki.”

He called for Isshiki who was near Tamanawa to come over. Isshiki gently excused herself from Tamanawa and jogged back.

“What should we do about assigning jobs to the elementary students?”

When he asked her, Isshiki lightly crossed her arms and tilted her head in contemplation.

“Uuumm… We still haven’t decided on anything yet, right…? Wouldn’t it be better to confirm it with them before anything else…?”

“No…”

Judging from how Tamanawa and the others were, it’d be something along the lines of “you’re asking now?” Since we were tasked with dealing with them, we had to think for ourselves.

“For the time being, I suppose things that will be necessary but won’t be an obstruction. Along the lines of decorating or making the tree would work. And maybe buying the material too…”

“…I suppose so. Okay, then let’s go with that.”

Isshiki nodded her head and said. She directed the explanation to the elementary students along with Rumi.

That workload for the time being should suffice. But we had to think about what to do in the future. Considering we’re in the situation where we clueless about what to do, we had to think even further. We had to finalize the skeletal structure of the event, otherwise we’d just become a disorderly mob wasting time.

I left the handling of the elementary students to Isshiki and went to Tamanawa. Originally, this was what Isshiki should be doing, but there was something called affinity to people. Because of their age difference, Isshiki probably couldn’t be frank with him. In that case, that’s where I should follow through for her.

I approached Tamanawa who was having a friendly chat with his group of friends and I lightly coughed. Tamanawa then noticed and turned around.

“What is it?”

Tamanawa asked with a refreshing smile. I wasn’t very good with these types of people who leaked this good natured aura. Somehow, a recognizable face would flicker by. Because I jumped ahead of my awareness of being terrible with these people, the way I spoke sounded crude.

“Um, even with all these helping hands, if we don’t have anything decided, we can’t really do anything…”

“Okay, then let’s all think this through together.”

Even I was completely speechless to his next-to-instant reply.

“All of us you say… If we just have a vague discussion with each other, we’re never going to decide on anything. For now, we should try to break things down and it’d be better to start considering things from.”

“But wouldn’t that just narrow our outlook? I think we should all explore for a solution together.”

Tamanawa interrupted me without listening to me until the very end. Still, if I were to back down here, everything would repeat itself. Again, I tried to give a rebuttal from a different direction.

“No, but the time…”

“That’s right. We should think about how to deal with that together too.”

That’s like working overtime for the sake of holding a conference to get rid of overtime, wasn’t it? I thought about how I should get it across to him while scratching my head and Tamanawa made a deliberate kind smile as if he noticed my impatience.

“I understand you’re in a hurry, but let’s try our best together and COVER each other.”

Tamanawa made slightly exaggerated gestures and patted me on the shoulders as if trying to encourage me. He wasn’t using all that much strength, but my shoulders still just dropped.

It looked like it would be pointless regardless of what I had said.

I may be repeating myself, but there was something called affinity to people. That being said, I felt that Tamanawa and I had the worst possible affinity. But it was likely that Tamanawa wasn't fully to blame.

True enough. There were plenty of times where incorporating the opinions and point of views of many people, the things that could be created would turn out remarkable. It may just be because the way I did things was just different.

To cooperate with people, to rely on someone, those were things that took time. Because of my lack of experience in that department, that may have been why I couldn't understand Tamanawa's way of doing things.

I was here after committing many mistakes. I could have been mistaken about something this time too.

"…I got it. But we should probably hold that conference soon."

After saying that, I forcibly swallowed my own doubt.

"Okay, let's hold the conference right away then."

Tamanawa ended our conversation, called out to the other Kaihin Sogo High students, and started up the conference.

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Today's conference was being held to discuss the more specific details of the event.

"Up until now, we were able to settle on the GRAND DESIGN, but today, let's have a DISCUSSION on the portions regarding CREATIVITY."

Tamanawa took up the position akin to a moderator and opened up with a long-winded speech.

All of Kaihin Sogo High nodded in response.

One supervisor of the elementary students whom we had assigned the job of decorations and our side, Sobu High, participated in the conference.

To be going into a discussion of the specifics of the event, I suppose the conference itself was finally seeing some progress.

After confirming that there weren't any objecting voices to his earlier proposal, Tamanawa began in a composed tone.

"Since we're starting from ZERO BASE, everyone should feel free to say what they want."

After that, the hands from the Kaihin Sogo side went up one by one.

"Doing something very Christmas-esque would be totally good."

"I suppose we can't really leave out the TRADITIONAL aspects of it though, huh?"

"But regarding the demands to us, it should be in line with high school students, right?"

The discussion was gradually becoming abstract again. Not good, the conference wasn't going to be any different from the brainstorms we had so far at this rate.

As expected, Tamanawa seemed to have perceived this as well. After a nod, he addressed everyone.

"It has to be Christmas related, but something in line with us, I see. Like what kind of things for example?"

From there, opinions popped out one by one like a word association game.

"I feel like the STANDARD for a regional EVENT like this would be a CLASSIC Christmas CONCERT."

"But it'd be good if we could cater to the young MINDS too. Like a BAND."

"Wouldn't JAZZ be more Christmas oriented?"

"Then we might as well just do a choir. We could borrow a PIPE ORGAN too."

The members of Kaihin Sogo High had plenty of motivation as they aggressively shot out ideas. One person would propose something and another person would expand on the possibilities of that idea and then they would suggest a completely new opinion.

Orchestra, band, jazz concert, choir, dance, play, gospel, musical, closet drama, and so forth…

I had the job of recording the minutes too, so I made a memo of all of the raised opinions.

This trend wasn't bad at all. Even those in our student council were raising their hands contributing several of their opinions. It looked like because the earlier conference had an atmosphere that was difficult to speak up in that kept them from actively throwing out their ideas.

I continued taking memos for a bit longer.

Did we exhaust all of our opinions? When I reviewed the enumerated list, I could see a small glimmer of hope. If we kept this pace, we might be able to finalize the details before the day was over.

Just as I had that thought Tamanawa blurted out something horrifying.

"Good. Now, let's discuss all of them."

What kind of joke was that? Was that some sort of Chibalian[45] joke? I looked at Tamanawa's face, but he looked extremely serious. In fact, his refreshing smile he made showed that he was enjoying the flow of the conference.

…By "all of them", you mean every single opinion that came up? As in, check the feasible pros and cons of all of them one by one?

I had the feeling we definitely didn't have that kind of time left. The Christmas event was only about a week away. Regardless of what we decided to go with, considering the time we would need to prepare, practice, and coordinate ourselves, we had to start the preparations right now or there would be trouble.

"Wouldn't it be faster to choose one of them right now instead?"

I couldn't restrain myself as I spoke out and Tamanawa closed his eyes and lightly shook his head.

"Rather than quickly shooting down opinions, we should be making something that incorporates everyone's suggestions in a way that everyone would be satisfied with."

“No, like I said…”

“We have things systematically close to each other, so I think we have plenty of room to do this together.”

Even with my attempt to refute him, Tamanawa said so without yielding.

Certainly, it’s just like Tamanawa said. One way of making things was to dig around for a unifying proposal.

However, was that really okay?

A scraping, unpleasant feeling of discomfort assaulted the interior of my stomach.

But as I was unable to think of any more rebuttals to Tamanawa, the conference continued on.

From there, the aspect of the conference once again changed from a little earlier.

“Why don’t we consolidate the music and make a Christmas CONCERT with various GENRES?”

“So if we looked at it from there, then wouldn’t music and a MUSICAL work out pretty well?”

“Why don’t we just do all of it and make it into a movie?”

It looked like Kaihin Sogo High’s objective, as per Tamanawa’s words, was to come up with a unifying proposal. The bulk of the discussion shifted in the direction of how they would go about making all of their ideas a reality.

Tossing out ideas itself was good. Stimulating the conference was something that should be welcomed.

I didn’t mind if a formal brainstorm was chosen for the sake of presenting many ideas.

But in the brainstorm and conference we were holding where nobody’s ideas were rejected, there was no foreseeable conclusion in sight.

The conference I thought was proceeding on smoothly was beginning to look nonsensical.

When I noticed, my hands recording the minutes had stopped. I loosely let my hands hang under the desk and sat there in silence watching the conference.

The expression that I had was completely different from those who were energetically involved in the discussion.

They had vivid and bright smiles floating on their faces.

That was when I noticed.

They were all enjoying this moment. That's to say, they were enjoying this exchange between each other.

What they wanted wasn't the very idea of volunteer service, but the self-acknowledgement of them doing these activities.

It's not that they wanted to do work. They just wanted to be immersed with the feeling of working. They just wanted to feel like they were actually doing it.

And then, they would feel like they did everything that they could, where ultimately, everything had turned into nothing.

———Aah, it really irritated me how that was exactly like someone out there and how it seemed like he was showing off his past mistakes.

He thought he had accomplished something, but in fact, he really didn't accomplish anything at all.

Even though he couldn't see anything at all.

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Ultimately, even with the time just about nearing the end, the conference didn't end and the conclusion was deferred to another day.

For the time being, the closest thing to a conclusion was that we all scrutinized the practicality of every opinion and with that, we would talk it over again and called it a day.

The elementary students had already gone home quite a while ago. We, who stayed behind, arranged our preparations to go home as well and left one by one.

I parted from Isshiki and the other student council members and when I pedaled my bike from the community center, it hit me.

I'm hungry… Since I was out of it the entire time during the conference, I ended up forgetting to eat the snacks.

There'd be dinner if I just went home, but I couldn't get my empty stomach off my mind. It should be okay to eat just a little… I stopped my bike for a moment and sent Komachi a brief mail like a telegram with the message "don't need food today".

I then took into consideration my current location and the status of my stomach and thought about the best thing to eat. They say that hunger was the ultimate spice, but that's wrong. For me, the ultimate spice was someone treating me. But, well, since I was alone, there was no way anyone would treat me. I also had to keep in mind the condition of my wallet as well.

So that meant… ramen, yeah.

Once I decided, I quickly got into motion.

As I hummed a variant of the Nausicaa theme, lanlan ♪lanlalalaramen ♪[46], I cheerfully pedaled my bike down the road.

I crossed the overpass and arrived at the front of Inage Station. If I go past the roundabout in front of the station, the shopping district where an array of food and drink stores, arcades, bowling alleys and karaoke would come into view. If I made a left turn at the lights ahead for a little longer, I would arrive at my destination.

I waited for the traffic light to turn from red to green.

And there, I spotted an unexpected individual.

Over his Sobu High jersey was a windbreaker and around his neck was a fluffy muffler. It was Totsuka.

Totsuka looked like he noticed me as well. As he readjusted the tennis bag on his back that looked somewhat heavy, he waved his hands at me.

When the lights changed, he looked to his left and his right before running over.

“Hachiman!”

Out came together with the voice that called my name was Totsuka’s white breath.

Surprised to coincidentally meet him in the middle of town like this, I responded by lightly raising my hand.

“Yo.”

“Uh huh, yo!”

Totsuka slightly raised his hand back with a bashful smile as if the earlier crude greeting was embarrassing. Aaah, I feel healed…

It wasn’t very often I had the chance to meet Totsuka outside of school. Then again, I never go out in the first place, so for us to be meeting like this made me totally think there were miracles and magic.

Well, there was no such thing as miracles or magic, such was this world. So, why was Totsuka here?

“What are you doing at a place like this?”

When I asked him, Totsuka squeezed his tennis bag and raised it to show it.

“I’m on my way back from school.”

Speaking of which, not only was Totsuka in the tennis club, he was also enrolled in the tennis school. And so that school was somewhat close to here, I think… Alright, from now on, let’s hang around here at this time of the day for no reason. Wait, but if we end up meeting a lot, it’d definitely be creepy so let’s keep it to once a week.

As I was wholeheartedly making my weekly schedule, Totsuka looked curiously at me, still riding on the bike.

“You too, Hachiman, what’s up? Your house isn’t this way, right?”

“Aah, I just thought I’d grab something to eat.”

“So that’s how it is.”

When I answered, Totsuka nodded convincingly and paused for a bit as if thinking. He then slightly tilted his head and looked at me with upturned eyes shyly.

“…Can I go with you too?”

“Heh?”

My body reflexively stiffened up to those unexpected words. I ended up letting out a rather idiotic voice.

During that time, Totsuka was pressing against the muffler around his collar and anxiously twisted his body as he waited for my answer.

“Ah, yeah. Of course.”

When I said that, Totsuka let out a sigh that seemed close to being relieved. He then made an elastic, tender smile.

“Yay. So, what to eat, huh?”

“Anything’s fine with me.”

After saying that, I realized that this correspondence was terrible. “Anything’s fine” was no good when you were dealing with girls. By the way, I heard that, if the guys said something specific like “ramen” or “udon”, they’d make a really disgusted face. In other words, when the girls asked you “what do you want to eat?”, you had to answer with something that they may want to eat. What’s with that impossible game? Were girls an esper training facility?

But Totsuka was a guy, so it was okay.

Totsuka blinked incessantly and asked me.

“Hachiman, didn’t you already decide what to eat?”

See, that’s actually… you! I was close to spouting out a line that the Big Bad Wolf from Little Red Riding Hood would say, but there was no way I could. I mean, I am human after all…[47]

“Not at all, I just kind of came over here, that’s all. That’s why, anything’s fine.”

I said so with a deliberate gentleman's tone.

Although I was in the mood for ramen, the reason was because of process of elimination. Since I often ate by myself, I unconsciously chose a seat by the counter. There weren't any issues when the store wasn't crowded but to take a table when I was alone made me feel apologetic.

Besides, even if it wasn't ramen, being able to eat with Totsuka would make anything taste good. I said earlier that getting treated was the ultimate spice, but I'll take that back. The ultimate spice had to be Totsuka. If Momoya[48] started selling using "it's Totsuka", that'd be bad. It wouldn't be a problem with goods being bought out as it'd be an issue with being acquired by a corporation.

As we talked about what to eat, Totsuka clapped his hands.

"Ah. Then how about yakiniku?"

Hey, hey, they tend to say stuff about a guy and woman eating yakiniku together[49], but how would that work if it were two guys eating together…?

As I thought about it, Totsuka looked like he came up with something and groaned as he tilted his head in contemplation.

"But yakiniku's a little expensive, huh?"

"That's right. It's as they say, it eats up your wallet."

"That's Hachiman for you, huh…"

He let out a troubled laugh.

Still, yakiniku, huh…

If you wanted to eat meat, then there should've been other places… As I looked around, the fast food chain, First Kitchen came into view. Because of its well-placed position immediately from the station, it was a store used often by the students in this area. Outside of the store was a hanging banner with the words "yakiniku galbi wrap" on it.

"Why don't we go over there?"

When I pointed it out, Totsuka's eyes sparkled.

"Yeah, that might be good!"

After getting Totsuka's approval, we entered the First Kitchen near the station. Still, what was with the abbreviation of First Kitchen[50] anyway? It felt kind of mortifying for some reason.

The warm interior of the store which suddenly changed from outside with the cold blowing winds was crowded. It seemed like people on their way back from prep school and work had stopped by.

When we lined up before the registers, Totsuka let out a small sigh. His cheeks were slightly blushed.

"The heating inside's pretty strong, huh?"

As he said that, Totsuka grabbed his muffler. His clothes rustled as he unfastened the muffler around his neck and his nape looked unusually captivating. I started to blush myself once I caught a glimpse of that.

How odd. How very odd. Totsuka's a guy. The reason why I turned red right now was because of the heating or possibility because I was starting to get sick. Calm down. Calm down and recite a haiku!

Could I be sick, hm? There's no way I could be, right! Totally am, yep (sick).

…This was definitely a sickness. To be reciting a haiku in the first place meant I was already completely sick.

As I panicked internally while in line, it was finally our turn. Judging from the crowd, it'd be faster for the two of us to order at the same time than one by one.

I lined up next to Totsuka and we both took a glance at the menu.

When I did, Totsuka pointed at the yakiniku galbi wrap.

"Ah, Hachiman. Let's go with this one."

"Yeah. Then, we'll get that."

After paying the bill and getting our yakiniku galbi wrap, we went up to the second floor.

Fortunately, there were tables still open. We heaved ourselves into the seat and quickly went to eating. We first dug into the main component, the yakiniku galbi wrap.

I spontaneously screamed out “it’s deeeeeeeeeliiiiiiiiiiiiiiiciooooooooooooooooouss!”[51] while light spilled out from both my eyes and mouth as I traversed the vacuums of space. It wasn’t that exaggerated, but in light of what Totsuka had recommended, well, its taste was ordinarily good.

While it was ordinarily good, I wasn’t really sure of the reason why Totsuka suggested this.

“…Still, why yakiniku?”

I ate out with Totsuka a few times before, but I recall him being a light eater. Also, if I were to choose, he definitely felt more like someone who would prefer vegetables over meat…

When I asked him, Totsuka embarrassingly spoke up.

“I thought it’d be good for when you were tired so…”

Ha, I see. He did just come from some exercise, so he was probably a little hungry. So it’s something like protein intake after training or so. Probably.

Or so I explained to myself arbitrarily, but Totsuka added with a small voice.

“It’s because you’ve been kind of like that recently, Hachiman…”

“Really?”

I was aware of my fatigue. However, that had more to do with my mental state. That’s why I told him with a face as if it wasn’t anything and Totsuka lightly shook his head.

His eating hands had stopped and Totsuka timidly looked up at my face.

“Did something, happen?”

Both Totsuka’s eyes and voice were kind. It’s just that Totsuka’s gaze looked more sincere than his normal self and that earnestness pressured me.

Before answering, I sipped my oolong tea. If I didn't do that, I felt like my voice would come out dry instead.

"…Not really. Nooothing at all."

Thanks to swallowing various things, my voice had come out a lot smoother than I thought. My tone was brighter than usual and it was likely I had mixed in a smile meant to keep Totsuka from needlessly worrying any further.

However, Totsuka's expression looked slightly lonely in response to my smile.

"…I see. I guess Hachiman won't really say anything, huh?"

I didn't know what Totsuka's expression was like with his down cast face and his lowered shoulders. But his following voice sounded depressed.

"If it's Zaimokuza, I wonder if he knows about it…?"

"No, that guy doesn't have anything to do with it."

When he suddenly brought up an unrelated name, I was a little surprised. But inside of Totsuka, there seemed to be a connection as he shook his head and raised his face.

"But you talked with Zaimokuza before."

When he said "before", I finally realized what he was talking about.

During that student council election, the one person I consulted with outside of my family, Komachi, was Zaimokuza. After that, the number of people who cooperated with me increased due to Komachi's arrangements, but the one person who I personally talked to was just Zaimokuza alone. But it's not like I intended that to mean anything special in particular. It was only a matter of having met with Zaimokuza first and since he was easy to talk to, I didn't have to hesitate to get his cooperation.

It looked like Totsuka took it in a different way.

"I just thought that was kind of nice. I'm just really jealous you could talk to him about things like that or something…"

Totsuka spoke awkwardly and slowly, word by word. The way he had phrased it made it sound like that behavior was something to be commended for.

But that's wrong. That was definitely not something as beautiful as Totsuka made it out to be. I thought it was a behavior that was exceedingly self-righteous and selfish that made use of the kindness of others simply to satisfy my own self-interest.

Totsuka didn't know anything about that.

That's why he was giving me these warm words even now.

"I don't think I'll be of any use, but…"

I could see Totsuka squeezing his jersey under the desk. His thin shoulders were slightly trembling. I didn't want him to worry any more than he needed to.

I worried about how I should smooth things over and as I scratched my head, I spoke in clusters.

"It's nothing like that. Really, it's not a big deal. It was just something Isshiki asked of me, so I was just a bit busy with it… For the most part, I was the one who pushed the role of president onto her so, well, so that's part of it. That's all."

I tried to summarize with the straightforward truth while not voicing anything other than that. Thanks to that, I stumbled over most of my words.

But Totsuka raised his face as if those words were better off actually being said. And as if trying to ascertain the truth, he looked at me with honest eyes.

"Really?"

"Yeah. That's why you don't need to worry."

If I spent just even a little bit longer thinking, I had the feeling I would've said something else. That's why I answered immediately.

"I see."

He let out a relieved sigh and Totsuka reached for his coffee. Even after a sip, his hands didn't let go of the cup. He squeezed the cup as if warming the palms of his hands and murmured.

"Hachiman, you're really cool after all."

"Ha?"

My surprise was probably reflected on my face. Totsuka who looked at my face was taken aback.

"I-I don't mean it in a weird way!"

Totsuka shook both his hands in a panic and denied it. His face was completely red and as he fiddled with his hair, he started off with "um" before speaking up.

"That is, it's kind of hard to say but… Even when it's painful or hard, you keep trying your best without complaining. I just think, that's really, cool…"

When he explained it, I got needlessly self-conscious. I put my chin in my hands and looked away. Unintentionally, my speaking ended up sounding curt.

"…That ain't it, really. I'm voicing my complaints, grudges too."

"Ahaha, that's true."

Totsuka smiled in relief. With that kind smile, he spoke in a reserved, small voice.

"…But, just let me know if you're in trouble, okay?"

He asked one last time for measure and I nodded without a word. It's exactly because of how earnest he asked that I thought I shouldn't put it into words so easily. To Totsuka who saw trust and cooperation as something beautiful, then that was even more so.

When I agreed, Totsuka nodded back.

After that, an odd silence was born. Totsuka looked embarrassed somehow and was facing downwards.

I could understand from experience that the mood was more relaxed compared to earlier and I nonchalantly spoke.

“Want to eat something sweet?”

“Ah, that sounds good. Like dessert.”

Totsuka quickly raised his face and agreed.

“Okay, I’ll go buy something. Wait a bit.”

I stood up without waiting for a positive or negative answer from Totsuka.

When I went down, the registers were packed as usual. It looked like it would take a bit before it was my turn.

With the frequent of outgoing and incoming people, the heating near the registers was rather strong. It felt like my head was becoming hazy so I decided to go outside for a little bit.

The December nights were cold, but the chilly sensation felt good on my burning face. Since I came out without my coat and muffler, the dry wind crept in through the back of my neck. My body quickly shrank.

As I stood there alone shivering on the street corner, a single person passing shot an odd look at me. The others paid me no attention.

In that instant, the words Totsuka said earlier came to mind.

“Cool”, huh…

It was nothing like that. It was probably just me being obstinate. I think it might’ve been as simple as trying to show off.

I was only being stubborn so I could preserve what I had decided internally what I should really look like.

Even now as well, the repulsive monster of reason, the provocative monster of self-consciousness was lurking about in this self.

If I were to be aware of the existence of that thing, then I might’ve been able to accept Totsuka’s words positively.

But Yuigahama's forced smiling face, the downtrodden expressions that Isshiki would sometimes show, Tsurumi Rumi being alone, and above all else, Yukinoshita's quiet yet resigned smile made me ask once more.

Was that really correct?

I let out a small sigh and looked up to the starless night sky. Filling the visible sky illuminated by the city glow were clouds.

Chapter 5: That future is what Hiratsuka Shizuka wishes for

It was after school. Once I left the club, I looked outside from the hallway of the special building.

Raindrops smoothly dripped down the glass. The rain that persisted even now since the morning bleakly poured and poured.

The other day, after informing Yukinoshita about Komachi's exams and that I'd be leaving early, she wasn't particularly doubtful and I was able to leave the club.

Was there a window open somewhere? The floor was damp and my indoor shoes squeaked as I walked in the empty hallway.

There was one week left until Christmas.

Chiba in December rarely saw snow. I didn't have to worry about a white Christmas. But what I had to worry about was the dreary workplace I was about to head to.

I left the school building and headed directly for the community center.

Because it was raining when I was about to leave home, I came to school by taking the train and bus. If it was a warmer season, then I would've came on my bike and got mostly wet, but during the winter, I really wanted to avoid that.

Because of the dropping leaves from the trees, the street which I traveled along was bleaker than ever.

Normally, the sun wouldn't be set for another few hours, but because of the weather today, it was already dark.

In my clouded field of vision, the umbrella moving ahead of me was dazzling. Decorating the vinyl umbrella at a single point was a lovely, printed peduncle.

The owner twirled her umbrella as she walked seemingly staving off the boredom. Occasionally, her flaxen hair would peek out.

Judging from her hair style and her height, the one ahead of me seemed to be Isshiki.

Isshiki was walking in a slow pace so I ended up catching up to her quickly. When I lined up alongside her, she noticed me as well and tilted her umbrella to check my face.

“Ah, senpai.”

“Hey.”

I answered back by slightly raising my umbrella as well.

“Are you going to buy snacks today too?”

“Nope, it doesn’t look like there’ll be a conference today.”

“Aah, that’s right.”

As Isshiki said, a conference wasn’t going to be held today. Yesterday, the time was delegated for examining the raised opinions and thinking of the pros and cons to each one as well as a unifying proposal for implementing them practically. So there wouldn’t be any catering today. It looked like my job of carrying the bags of snacks wouldn’t be necessary as well.

As I thought about that, Isshiki peeked under my umbrella and made a wicked smile.

“…Fufufu, what a shame. Not being able to score some points with me and all.”

“Like there’d be something that simple that could score points with you.”

While we had that senseless conversation as we walked, a vinyl umbrella that could be described as plain or even boorish hurried our way. Under the umbrella was the shameless fluttering of the hems of a Kaihin Sogo High skirt.

“Oooh, what’s this? It’s Isshiki-chan and Hikigaya.”

Raising her umbrella high, the one who called out to us was Orimoto.

“Hellooo.”

“Heeya. You seeee, I was talking with my friends so now I’m kinda late.”

As usual, Orimoto’s take on the distance between people was close. From there, she lined up next to Isshiki and began chatting with her amiably. Of course, Isshiki didn’t show a

moment of displeasure in her face even in the face of that attitude. She made a bright, amiable smile and chatted back.

We continued walking in the rain as I listened to them from the side.

Just when the conversation between the two was about to stop, Isshiki had a realization and spoke.

“Speaking of which, weren’t you an acquaintance with senpai?”

“Yep, yep, we were in the same middle school.”

When Orimoto answered, Isshiki made a glance at me.

“So even senpai had someone he was close with, huh?”

That reaction of hers had me in a pickle. But similarly, Orimoto’s words that she responded with sounded a bit troubled.

“Rather than close, umm… Well, just a little.”

As if her ambiguous words felt out of place, Isshiki’s eyes glittered and she bit onto it.

“Oh, what’s this, what’s this? This vague wording of yours?”

Orimoto made an “oops” face and sent me a look.

I couldn’t blame her. It’s not like Orimoto and I were close, so for her to come out with an ambiguous wording like that was indicative of the truth.

But Isshiki wouldn’t let that opening slip by. She made a grin and pulled at my sleeve.

“Senpaaai, what’s goooing on?”

Stop it, stop pulling. Our hands are kind of touching too, you know, it feels kind of soft and it’ll make me really conscious of it, so stop it!

I was weakened by her incessant begging assaults which may have been her strategy to get me flustered and as I avoided her hands, I ended up slipping something out.

“Well, a lot happened back then…”

“A lot…”

Isshiki repeated after me and she then looked at Orimoto. Orimoto who was at a loss of how to answer stuttered, but brushed it off with a laugh.

“Well, it’s just a story from the past, see.”

That answer was a little surprising. I was expecting her to turn my past confession into the butt of jokes again, but she turned her face away from Isshiki and only spoke those words vaguely.

I won’t say I didn’t mind if they spoke about the past, but I only thought it’d be unavoidable if it did happen which made me interested in Orimoto’s change.

Isshiki looked like she wanted to ask more and having noticed that, Orimoto faced me and quickly changed the topic.

“Putting that aside, Hayama-kun doesn’t come out to things like this, huh?”

The word “Hayama” caused Isshiki to twitch in response. The amusing, broad grin that Isshiki had on her face the entire time was now stiff.

“…Are you an acquaintance with Hayama-senpai toooo?”

Isshiki’s voice was slightly deep. Scary. She may have been smiling with her face while going “ufufu”, but this had to be that; her eyes were too serious that she was smiling in an effort to not show it…

“We went out for a bit before, you see.”

“Hoh, went out…”

Isshiki picked out a word from what she said and sized up Orimoto. Crap. This was going to turn into something troublesome.

“He’s busy with club, so I doubt he could.”

When I broke into their conversation, Orimoto tilted her umbrella and asked.

“Hikigaya, you look like you got along with him so I thought he’d stop by halfway through or something.”

“We don’t get along at all and calling him out at a time like this would just be a bother.”

“Really? I mean, don’t things seem bad? Our student president only started in fall so he’s not used to it. That’s why I thought you’d call him in the same way ours would call for helpers or something.”

I see. So even the Kaihin Sogo High side, at the very least, Orimoto recognized that the situation was bad. She may have appeared to unconditionally agree with everything, but she seemed to be aware of it internally.

“True, it might be bad, but I wouldn’t call for Hayama.”

“Hmmm… Well, if we met, it’d be pretty awkward anyway.”

The words she added in a small voice were sensible. Considering how we broke up that time when I went to Chiba with Hayama and the others, it was probably hard to face him. Even I didn’t really want to actively meet Hayama face to face either.

The reason why Orimoto brought up Hayama was either because it would’ve been difficult for her to meet him or a possibility she just wanted to confirm. I could understand that.

But as Isshiki was pondering about something, she alternated glances between me and Orimoto. Well, if she didn’t remember Orimoto, then there wasn’t a need to tell her. I bet she didn’t even have the slightest interest in other girls too, huh…

When we stopped talking about Hayama that served as a connecting point in our conversations, we walked for a while without saying anything.

We were just about close to reaching the entrance of the community center until Orimoto spoke up with “aah” in a voice that seemed like she wanted to say something. I wonder what it was, glanced at her and Orimoto was staring at my face.

“…Also, I thought maybe those girls Hikigaya are close with might come too or something.”

“No… Probably not.”

There’s no way I would call them. There’s no way I could call them.

“Huuuh…”

Orimoto said so in disinterest and kicked up a puddle of water. She then tilted the umbrella and looked up at the sky. Following her, I looked up at the sky as well. Towards the west was the slight glimpse of sunset coming out. If it was that much, the rain might stop soon.

Regardless, the sky was still dark as always.

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It was a little after entering the community center. I raised my eyes up to the clock.

Only time passed today as well.

I closed the laptop I borrowed and pressed my eyes with my fingers.

The task of looking over the opinions from yesterday’s conference was a lot more difficult than I thought.

As time passed, the things I could do also dropped little by little.

There isn’t enough time, there isn’t enough help, there isn’t a budget. If you had these three excuses, then you would have a legitimate reason. As long you had this reason, you could give up on anything and you’d be able to compromise.

Naturally, that wasn’t limited to just postponing the schedule and freezing the project, but we were already at the point where we couldn’t withdraw.

The essential portions of the event had not been settled on and the only thing that increased was involved people. If you likened this to anime, then it would be something like the production committee having decided on something while the main anime in question wasn’t. There’s no way that anime would be done nicely, huh…

And while we’re like this, the clock ticked forward and the calendar progressed day by day. We could call it spent time and effort, but truthfully, it was just forced working hours. If you likened this to anime, then the planning conference would take up all the time leaving all sorts of important stuff in all sorts of messes… or something.

What was essential was balance and determination. At the present moment, both of these were completely lacking.

After another sigh, I turned towards the laptop again.

I calculated the budget, confirmed the schedule, and thought about the cost performance of the expenses regarding the realistic portions of the plan. Just in case, I looked up the contact info for the church and jazz band or so forth.

Still, the more I did this work, the more I felt how infeasible this entire event was going to be. Goooosh, what the heck is this, are they, like, total idiots or something? I murmured out in a small voice “there’s like totally no way we can do this!” and the others at Sobu High seemed to be feeling the same way when the vice president let out a sigh.

After that, he showed me documents.

“About this, no matter how I calculate it, the budget’s just not enough. What should we do?”

“We either shave off the things we do or raise funds. I guess we’ll have to vote at the next conference.”

Honestly, that kind of time was precious. But to get the other side to give up, we needed well-grounded material; we were at a dead end otherwise. If we had a valid argument along with material, we might’ve been able to take an opposing stance.

I scratched my head and reached out for my coffee. The astringent and bitter taste of the black coffee in the paper cup seeped out and I couldn’t think of it as good at all.

Was there something sweet around here…? I looked at the top of the desk. And ahead of where I was looking was Isshiki who walked my way.

“Senpai. The decorations are about to be finished soon. What should we dooo next?”

Aah, that’s right. Our job was to deal with the elementary students too, huh… I momentarily stopped my hands from doing work and crossed my arms and thought for a bit.

Things that would be necessary, but also doable by elementary students regardless of the developments in the future, huh? The ornaments for the venue were just about finished. So the other things left would be…

After thinking that far, something came to mind.

“Has the tree been set up yet?”

When I said that, Isshiki had a difficult face.

“We already have the tree… But wouldn’t it just be in the way if we set it up nooow?”

Well, that reply was expected. True, it really would be an annoyance if we just set it up here. The tree this time in particular was rather huge as well, so it had a rather bizarre presence to it. In that case, we could take advantage of that presence.

“We can talk with the center and ask them to move it to the entrance. It should be perfect since it’s just a week before the event. On the day of the event, we can move it back in the hallway then.”

“I see… I understand.”

After a few nods, Isshiki walked back to the elementary students. I saw her off and looked back at the laptop. I didn’t see any snacks in the end, but talking with Isshiki just now was a good breather. Still, having to have a change of pace from work to do work was signs of terminal symptoms, wasn’t it? Corporate slave peace? False influence? Give me freedom before I die from overwork…[52]

But I couldn’t be joking around like this. Although I was only helping Isshiki in order to fulfill my responsibility of forcing her into becoming the president, I now noticed that I was the one giving out directions. And no one in particular seemed to have any qualms about it. Everyone naturally began confirming things with me.

The way this was done was extremely bad. It was a hopelessness I had seen somewhere before.

If we didn’t change the situation, it would eventually fail. That was something I was all too familiar with. Above all else, it was a situation that the student council president, Isshiki Iroha, definitely wouldn’t be too overjoyed about.

To quickly change the situation, I’ll have to leave the rest to Isshiki and get a consensus.

I carried the organized documents in my hands and headed to where Tamanawa was. The usual style of conference we had was no good. If the representatives didn't decide things in a summit meeting, then they'd just sidestep each other.

"Hey, got a second?"

"What is it?"

Tamanawa seemed to be doing some sort of work. Displayed on the screen of his MacBook Air were the words "Plan Outline". When I took a peek, the things typed out were how to get a synergetic result from incorporating many opinions.

So it looked like he was intent on trying to make everyone's opinions a reality.

Having taken a look at the draft of the plans, it made me a bit reluctant to speak, but even so, I presented the documents in my hands to him.

"I looked into the many ideas here. The things that we might be able to do and not… Well, we won't even be able to do most of them, but…"

"Oooh! Thanks!"

Tamanawa took the documents and flipped through it.

"With this, we have a clear look on the problems, right?"

"Yeah."

Needless to say, there wasn't enough time and money.

"Okay, so let's think about how to resolve this."

"No, wait a second. Really, that's impossible. There's only a week left."

"Yeah, that's why I think we can use external sources to order a BAND and the sort. See, I did a search, but they have a lot of those PRIVATE LIVE deployment SERVICES. If we can put that together, I think we can make a good EVENT befitting of us."

Where in the budget was that going to come from…? That thought stayed lodged in my throat, but to someone whose thoughts coagulated internally, then it probably wouldn't get through.

It’s not that Tamanawa didn’t listen to people because he did. As a matter of fact, he listened to everything.

That’s exactly why he would try to derive a conclusion that took into consideration every opinion.

“First, we’ll talk it over with everyone and decide on it at the next conference.”

Tamanawa’s intent seemed strong. It looked like he was being stubborn somehow. On the many occasions I talked with Tamanawa, his stance had yet to break down. Rather than stubborn, it should be called tenacious, no, delusional, perhaps? It was a mystery as to why he would go so far as to try to make every opinion a reality.

But that was when I realized.

It wasn’t all that long ago since Tamanawa became the student president. He had a rather impressive appearance that I misunderstood, but he was just like Isshiki in that it was only recently since he became president.

That’s why he wanted people’s opinions and would listen to them. Only after getting consent would he take action. To avoid problems from springing up, he would adjust them after the fact without turning it into a dispute.

For Isshiki who looked up to me for instructions, that mentality may have been similar. I couldn’t even act as a decent support for Isshiki who I knew only for a short while so there was no way I’d be able to support Tamanawa who I only met just the other day, much less change his mind as well which was even more impossible.

There was nothing more to ask for. Next time, decide it for sure; I pressed on him that single point.

“…If you don’t decide things for sure at the next conference, we won’t be able to finish the work. I’m counting on you there.”

“Of course.”

Tamanawa answered and as expected, he still had a refreshing face. But right now, somewhere, it looked fishy.

I gave up on convincing Tamanawa and returned to my original place.

This isn't good… I just lost all my options.

In the end, what we'd be doing would probably be decided at the next conference, but would it really? Judging by how the conferences have been up until now, I couldn't say so confidently.

Whatever the case, at this stage, I lost all the things I could do. The only thing left was to just watch this event fall apart embarrassingly.

As I thought that while heading to my seat, halfway there I spotted Rumi doing work by herself.

I looked around, but there were no other elementary students around. They should've been busy doing the decorations for the tree. I was curious about what she was doing alone and approached her.

"…Are you making the decorations?"

Rumi put the folded paper in between the scissors and cut along the creases. It looked like she was making the decorations resembling snowflakes.

Judging from the situation, apparently the decorations weren't actually all finished and that Rumi was finishing it up. Well, if you thought about it from the kids' side, they'd rather work on something new like setting up the tree than the same repetitive task of creating things.

Still, for there to be no supervisor with an elementary student using a sharp tool was odd. I guess I'll call out to her. Besides, since no one was watching, Rumi shouldn't get weird looks even if I talked to her.

"Are you doing this by yourself?"

I crouched just a bit and spoke with the intention of talking to her, but Rumi didn't answer. She just continued to place the folded paper in between the scissors.

…Well, not much I could do if she ignored me.

I gave up and just as I was about to leave by standing up, Rumi glanced at me. She then grabbed one more piece of paper and looked away from me.

"…Can't you tell from just looking?"

She replied with a cheeky tone that sounded like she was making a fool of me. What's with that time lag? The recent satellite broadcasting was a little bit faster you know.

As I thought what an uncute brat she was, the way she was doing the work by herself also left a good impression. At the same time, the reason the situation became like that came to mind.

Again, Tsurumi Rumi's situation was a side effect of my actions as well. In that case, then the responsibility I had to uptake was there as well.

I plumped down next to Rumi and I grabbed a sheet of folded paper from the stack. I swiped the scissors that were lying on the floor.

Uhhh… Haa, since there was an outline of the crystal on the paper, I should cut along the lines… No, that's wrong. It's created by folding along the lines something like a cut out of the sort… Surprisingly, this was a rather complicated setup and I began to fold and cut the paper imitating what I saw.

When I did, the sound of cutting beside me stopped. When I looked, Rumi had stopped working and was looking at me in surprise.

"…What are you doing?"

"Can't you tell from just looking?"

I answered her in the same way she did earlier. Rumi understood that and lightly glared at me with a frown.

"…You don't have anything else to do?"

"That's the thing, I really don't."

In other cases, there were plenty of things that needed to be done, but to my regret, there wasn't a single thing left that I could do. The rest was left to whatever happens at the next conference.

When I said that, Rumi looked at me with apathetic eyes.

"…Free person."

“Leave me alone.”

After that, it was just us two creating the remaining ornaments in silence.

I didn’t know who it was that suggested this, but creating these ornaments with the folded paper was more delicate than I had imagined and the work of cutting through the paper required quite a bit of concentration.

I found myself engrossed in the task and it felt like the noise coming from the Training Room had gone off somewhere.

But there, the sound of jogging footsteps increasingly got louder towards me.

Taking a look, Isshiki was jogging over here.

“Ah, I’m going to borrow the cutter, okaaay?”

She added a small excuse and grabbed several cutters lying on the top of the desk. It looked like they were tools needed for the tree decorations.

There, Isshiki noticed Rumi. Rumi was focused on her work that she didn’t pay Isshiki any attention. But Isshiki seemed to be interested somehow.

Isshiki waddled at me with her hands. What is it…? I bended my body over and Isshiki whispered into my ears.

“…Senpai, don’t tell me you like them younger?”

“Well, I’m not particularly bad with them.”

It might’ve been because of my little sister, but I wasn’t particularly too concerned with girls this young. In fact, I get more nervous with people close to my age. Of course, if they were as young as Kawasaki’s little sister, I definitely didn’t know how to deal with them, but it was only that much. Ah, I was completely bad with younger boys though. Those brats, they’re way too like animals so words wouldn’t get through to them after all…

I answered, but Isshiki didn’t. Was it just a corpse[53], I wonder…? I looked at her and Isshiki had a perplexed face.

“…Could it be that you were making passes at me just now, I’m sorry, I do like them older, but it really wouldn’t work out.”

“Wait, I clearly wasn’t saying that though?”

My gosh, I feel like an idiot for answering her question so seriously…

When I shook my hands at her to go away because she was getting in the way, Isshiki let out “what’s with that treatment…?” as a complaint and she went back to the Training Room.

Once Isshiki was gone, the quiet time continued on again.

The sound of rubbing papers and scissors. Neither of us said a word as we continued to pile up the snowflakes made from the folded papers.

Eventually, we finished the last one and Rumi and I looked at each other.

“Guess we’re done now…”

“…Uh huh.”

After she answered, she let out a satisfied sigh along with a small smile. But when her eyes met with mine, she quickly turned away seemingly out of embarrassment.

I let out a small sigh and stood up.

“…Now then, shall we go back?”

“U-Um…”

Still sitting, Rumi looked at me wanting to say something. However, I answered back without waiting for her.

“They’re probably still working on the tree, so why don’t you try going over there?”

“…Ah, okay.”

When she answered, Rumi stood up and headed for outside of the Training Room. As for myself, I went back to my original seat.

What Rumi wanted to say, I didn’t hear it. That’s because my chest hurt from that smile.

When I see that, it made me aware of how I would try to relieve myself from something this trivial. Even though Tsurumi Rumi's smile wasn't something to reinforce my own actions.

There were certainly things that were saved from my past way of doing things.

But just that alone surely wasn't enough.

My responsibility. Here I was, still not knowing that answer.

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The elementary students were sent home. After the short remaining work, once the remaining documents were put together, there was no longer anything else left to do.

The Sobu High student council members idly did tasks such as checking their work as well as recalculating the budget to kill time. As for Kaihin Sogo High, they seemed to be fully engrossed in a discussion.

I guess this was pretty much all of my work for today, huh?

"Isshiki, it doesn't look like there's anything else to do, so do you mind if I leave?"

When I asked Isshiki beside me who was flipping through a stack of papers, she looked up at the clock, thought for a bit, and spoke up.

"I suppose so… Shall we call it a day then?"

"Yeah. I'll be leaving first then."

My back received Isshiki's "thanks for the hard wooork" as I left the Training Room.

When I made it outside the community center, the rain had already let up. Reflected in the puddles of water was illumination of the city and the droplets of rain under the eaves absorbed the light. Still, as pretty as it was, this scenery looked dreary somehow.

I adjusted the collars of my coat and continued walking. It wasn't until I made it to the bike parking area that I suddenly realized I hadn't come on the bike today. Since it had been raining in the morning, I had taken the train and bus.

Miffed by this realization, I changed my course to the station. In the middle of my walk to there, MariPin came into view. The signboard was lit up brightly and the warmth of the store's interior flowed out upon the opening of the automatic doors.

Oh right, there was a KFC in MariPin wasn't there…? I completely forgot about the order.

I was a lot earlier than usual so I guess I'll make an order for the party barrel mom asked me to make. The house was a little far from here, but we're probably just going to heat it up again in the toaster oven, and not to mention the one picking it up would be anyway, so buying it here should be good enough. But still, to be picking up chicken, I suppose for the chicken me[54] this was the perfect role!

When I entered MARINPIA, the sight of people carrying large bags came into sight as if they were holding a Christmas sale. I did an oblique scan of the interior and once I spotted KFC, I headed in its direction.

For KFC, this time of the season where Christmas was approaching in just about a week was good for business as there was a line of several people apparently waiting to reserve a party barrel. Well, for people on the way back from their company, this was a good place to stop by. It's close to the station, after all. I lined up as well and made my order without incident.

I finished up what I needed to do. All that was left was to go home.

I started off for the closest exit to KFC. Because of the constant incoming and outgoing people, the automatic door stayed open. Beside the people on the first floor, the people heading for the nearby escalator as well as the people getting off of it mingled together creating a large congestion.

As you'd expect from Christmas, the end of the year. It was a rather urgent atmosphere, huh… And then, I looked at the escalator.

When I did, in the wave of people descending down the escalator, I spotted Yukinoshita Yukino. Even though I should've just left as soon as possible, I stopped my feet in surprise.

Yukinoshita really stuck out even in this congestion. I wasn't even looking for her, yet her figure quickly came into my view.

Yukinoshita seemed to have been shopping at a bookstore as she was holding a bookstore bag in her hands.

I was in the path she was heading in. Naturally, she noticed me as well and showed a surprised expression. Our eyes met and we both recognized each other's existences. Trying to act as if we never saw each other here would be difficult.

I lightly moved my head to greet her and Yukinoshita who just got off the escalator and headed for the exit nodded back.

"Yo."

"…Good evening."

My pace where I had remained still since earlier and Yukinoshita's, who walked with a brisk pace from the escalator, overlapped as we both went outside at almost the same timing.

The people heading on home on the main street and the coming and going shopping customers crowded the area.

After leaving the entrance on the KFC side, what quickly came into view in front of us was a small plaza. I wasn't sure about the afternoons on days off or the warm season, but on a cold night where the rain had let up, no one had stopped there.

But that's where we ended up stopping at for one reason or another.

Yukinoshita readjusted her coat and fixed her muffler to check its condition. I adjusted my muffler in a commanding fashion in the same way.

Was this a habit from being in the club recently? I could've just stopped myself, but as I was looking for words, I reflexively spoke up.

"Aah, were you shopping?"

"Yes… I could ask you the same, what are you doing here at a time like this?"

When I asked her, Yukinoshita spoke with the same unchanging expression and cold tone.

Today, I left the club early as well. Therefore, to be here at this kind of time was unnatural. It was obvious to be asked that here. A coincidental meeting here was something I had wanted to avoid. Still, now that we had met, there was no way to avoid it.

As I scratched my cheeks, I looked away from Yukinoshita.

“…I, well, just had some stuff to do.”

I couldn’t say what it really was. That’s why I voiced out obscure and meaningless, generic words. But there wasn’t a lie in it.

Yukinoshita looked down and complied with a quiet voice.

“I see…”

She then raised her face. Her lips which she bit looked worried as whether to say or not say something shivered ever so slightly and her eyes that faced me lightly shook.

"…I see that you're helping with Isshiki-san's request."

It was a quiet voice lacking in ambition. Those words that sounded like it would crumble were you to touch on it were like the dropping of frost during the night. That's why it felt terribly cold.

It's likely that Yuigahama didn't tell her. I think Yukinoshita probably guessed it herself. She may have tolerated it up until now, but now that she saw my suspicious actions in person, she probably couldn't keep herself from asking about it.

"Aah, well, there were circumstances and all…"

No matter how ambiguous I was with my words, the truth wouldn't change, but I couldn't say it any other way. Denying it at this point didn't have any meaning.

"You didn't have to go through the trouble of saying a lie like that."

Yukinoshita's gaze was directed at the empty ground where only the cold wind blew past. She was probably calling my excuse regarding Komachi a lie.

"It's not like I lied. It's one of the reasons."

"…I suppose so. That's true, you didn't say a lie."

When I said so self-depreciatively, Yukinoshita combed through her hair blown by the cold wind with her hands.

Seeing that gesture, that exchange at some point back then came to mind.

Yukinoshita Yukino doesn't lie. I obstinately believed in that and because of that, I was disillusioned by the fact that she didn't say the truth.

But this wasn't in regards to Yukinoshita. The one I was disillusioned with was my past self who forced that ideal onto her.

On the other hand, how was I now? I was worse than I was at that time. Not saying the truth wasn't a lie. I swallowed that deception and I was even using it.

For me to be using that kind of deception that I should have rejected so much made me think of how repulsive I was. That's why the words I spoke sounded remorseful.

"…Sorry for doing it on my own."

Yukinoshita closed her eyes and then quietly shook her head.

"It's not like I mind. What you personally do isn't something I have a say in, let alone have the qualifications for. Unless…"

Yukinoshita stopped her words there. The hands holding onto the bag over her shoulders gripped even stronger.

"You need my permission?"

Yukinoshita slightly tilted her head and her transparent eyes questioned me. Her tender voice wasn't criticizing me. That's why it felt unnecessarily painful. An oppressive feeling crawled its way to my chest.

"…No, just confirming."

I spat out those words. I didn't know what kind of answer would be correct. A correct answer might not have been prepared in the first place.

I moved only my eyes and looked at Yukinoshita. She was wearing that same smile she had in the club room that looked like she yearned for those long-past gone days.

"…I see. In that case, there isn't a need for you to apologize. Besides, working with you will let Isshiki-san feel more relaxed."

Yukinoshita smoothly spoke in a slow, yet nonurgent voice. I stayed silent and listened. If I wasn't allowed to apologize, was there anything else I could say?

Yukinoshita continued on. She did so without looking at me, but only at the fog-like clouds that were polluted by the orange lights of the far coast industrial area in the cloudy, starless sky.

"If it's you, I think you'll be able to resolve it. That's how it's been up until now after all."

I thought that wasn't right. I hadn't resolved anything up until now. Whether it was Isshiki or Rumi, in the end, I only made things vague which ultimately turned into a mess. As for saving them, it was absolutely nothing like that.

"It's not like I resolved anything… Besides, it's because I'm alone that I'm doing it by myself, that's all."

I'll do something regarding myself. It was nothing but a very natural thing to do. Whether I was thrown into it or it happened to fall into my hands, once I got involved, then it would eventually turn into my problem. That's why I was only doing it by myself.

It was something engraved in me and by relying on someone so easily despite not knowing any other way to do things would only turn it into something worthless. In the first place, even if someone who was wrong took the proper measure, it's obvious that they wouldn't come up with a correct result.

That's why I'll do it myself. That's all there was to it.

That should've been the same for Yukinoshita who I had been working together with in the club for more than half a year.

"The same could be said for you."

With confidence, no, with expectations, I said so. But Yukinoshita's words hardened.

"That's… not right."

She hung her head, sealed her mouth, and squeezed on the sleeves of her coat. Peeking out from her loosened muffler was the movement of her white throat. It looked as if she was struggling within the wind. This might have been the first time I had seen Yukinoshita like this.

Yukinoshita continued looking downwards and she squeezed out her words.

"I just always acted like I could do it… that I understood it all."

Just who was she talking about? Was it her or could it have been me? Nevertheless, it was probably the same thing either way. Just who was the one who thought that they understood everything?

That's why, I had to say something and even if I didn't get my thoughts in order, I still had to speak up.

"Hey, Yukinoshita…"

I tried to say something, but I couldn't continue my words any further. Yukinoshita quickly raised her face and interrupted me with her usual composed voice.

"Why don't you take a break from the club for a while? If you're being considerate with us, then that's an unnecessary concern."

Her expression that spoke in succession had a transparent smile again. It had a calmness that resembled a delicate bisque doll displayed in a glass case.

"It's not like I'm being considerate at all."

I knew that these words were not the ones I should've said. Even so, if I was silent here, then I understood that even that empty room would be lost.

However, a mistake stayed as a mistake. No matter how you tried to smooth it over, it wouldn't be fixed.

Yukinoshita quietly shook her head. She loosely let the bag she had around her shoulders drop.

"You've been being considerate the whole time… Ever since that time, always… That's why…"

As I intently listened to her vanishing voice, I waited for the succeeding words. But those words wouldn't come out as Yukinoshita said something different.

"But you don't need to force yourself anymore. For it to be destroyed from just that only means that's what it ultimately came down to… No?"

In the face of that question, I went silent.

That was something that I believed in, but not anymore.

However, Yukinoshita believed in it. The thing that I stopped believing in during that field trip.

I made one lie during that time. That wish of not wanting to change and them not wanting to change was distorted by that lie.

Ebina-san, Miura and finally, Hayama.

They wished for an unaltered blissful everyday life. That's why they lied little by little, deceived each other, and by going that far, it was a relationship that they wanted to protect. Having understood that much, there was no way I could deny that so easily.

The conclusion that they came up with, the choice to try to protect what they had was something I couldn't think of as wrong.

I incorporated them into my own self and ended up giving my approval to it. I was pleased with those days in my own way and even I started to feel disappointed in losing them.

Even though I was fully aware that they would all disappear eventually.

That's why my beliefs became warped and I lied to myself. There was nothing to replace things that were important. Once you lost those irreplaceable things, you could never lay your hands on them a second time. Therefore, you had to protect them; that's how I lied.

It's not that I had protected something. I was just clinging onto the feeling of having protected something.

Just now, the question Yukinoshita shot at me was surely an ultimatum.

There was no meaning to things that were only superficial. That was a single belief that both me and her once shared.

——Did I still have that belief?

I couldn't answer. As I am now, I was already aware of the fact that trying to mend surface appearances wasn't completely pointless. As one of the ways to do things, I understood that it existed. That's why I couldn't deny it.

Unable to say anything, Yukinoshita looked at me with lonesome eyes. Yukinoshita was quiet and seemed to be waiting for my answer. Still, when she understood it was a voiceless answer, she let out a small sigh and made a fleeting smile.

"You don't have to force yourself to come anymore…"

Her spoken voice was terribly kind.

The sound of loafers echoed on the brick stairs. Even in this congestion, I felt like I could hear the sound of the footsteps becoming farther and farther indefinitely.

Yukinoshita disappeared into the crowd of people. She wasn't that far away, yet it felt absurdly distant.

As I watched her off unable to say anything, I sat on the stairs of the small plaza.

When I noticed, a Christmas song was playing in the nearby store. In the plaza was a Christmas tree that was illuminated and decorated with a present motif ornament.

The contents of that box were probably empty.

As if it was like that club room. Even so, I still tried to reach out for that empty box.

Even though it wasn't something I was supposed to have wished for.

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I was in a daze. I wasn't thinking about anything in particular.

I sat at the steps of the small plaza and watched the repetitive flashing of the illumination on the tree for a while.

As I did that, my body was chilled by the cold and I finally made my decision. I let out a breath of white air and stood up.

When I checked my watch, not much time had passed since Yukinoshita had left.

The front of the station was boisterous from a lot of people returning home, and from shoppers and students on their way back from club.

Despite that, it felt strangely quiet to me.

Even after merging with the congestion from the small plaza, the surrounding voices and Christmas carols didn't enter my ears. Only the sighs I spat out could be clearly heard.

I slowly walked down the sidewalk. My feet wouldn't progress as I wanted possibly due to colliding against the wave of people leaving the station.

It wasn't only people as there were running cars stopped on the nearby road as well. They were probably cars waiting to pick up someone from the station or the cars that came and went from the parking lot.

A single car in that group honked its horn. Don't honk in the middle of the city like that… I directed an annoyed look in its direction. There were also other people including me looking in that direction it seemed.

And what I saw was a black sports car with an oval-shaped front that you'd rarely spot in this area. That car slowly drove up to my side and the window on the left side opened up.

"Hikigaya, what are you doing here?"

The face beyond that window was Hiratsuka-sensei's.

"Haa, well, I was just about to head home now… Sensei too, what are you doing here?"

I met an unexpected person at an unexpected place. When I asked, Hiratsuka-sensei abruptly revealed a smile.

"Well, there's only about a week left until the event, right? I figured I'd come check up on you guys, but it was already over by the time I got there. I was just thinking of heading home as well until I spotted you."

"You have good eyes, huh?"

"When you're stuck doing student counseling, students wearing their uniforms in the middle of town tend to attract one's eyes."

Hiratsuka-sensei smiled with a self-derisive aspect to it somewhere and she pointed at the passenger's seat.

"Good timing, I'll send you home."

"No, that's okay."

"Don't be a stuck up. Hop aboard. There's a car coming from behind."

Hiratsuka-sensei pressed me on. When I looked, a single car had driven up behind her. But now that she had said that, there's no way I could not get in the car.

I reluctantly tried to get in the car, but there was only one door on the left side. It must've been one of those two-seaters, huh? I had no choice, but to go around to the right side. Actually, this car had the steering wheel on the left, didn't it…?

I got in the car and sat down in the seat. I put on the seat belt and when I looked around inside, the seats and dashboard were made of fine leather and the meter and the finishing touches around it were made in aluminum with a metallic shine to it. What the heck is this, it's so cool.

"Sensei, did you have a car like this? It seems different from the one during summer break…"

When she drove us to Chiba Village that one time, I recall it being one of those typical minivan cars…

"Aah, that was a rental car. My beloved car is this guy."

As she said that, Hiratsuka-sensei happily tapped the steering wheel of her car with her fist. That triumphant look of hers resembled a handsome guy way too much. Still, for a single woman to be in possession of such an expensive-looking two-seater sports car, huh…? How should I put it? For her to be indulging in this kind of hobby made me think this was one of the reasons why she couldn't get married…

Hiratsuka-sensei's beloved car made low revving sounds and started off.

When I told her a rough estimate of where my house was, Hiratsuka-sensei nodded and turned the wheel. If it's from here, the fastest route would be the national highway.

But when I looked ahead where the light shone, we weren't headed for the highway.

I turned my gaze towards the driver's seat thinking it was strange and Hiratsuka-sensei puffed the cigarette in her mouth as she looked forward and spoke.

"Do you mind if we stop by somewhere?"

"Haa."

To be given a ride meant I couldn't really complain. I didn't know where we were going to stop by, but as long as I made it back home in the end, I didn't mind.

I fell back into the seat and rested my chin on my arms against the window frame. The street lights visible from the car were blotted by with an orange hue, possibly because of the slight onset of fog.

At my feet was warm air gently venting out. It felt good to my chilled body causing me to yawn several times.

Hiratsuka-sensei was wordless as she held the steering wheel next to me, but instead was humming with a small voice. The faint breathing and the gentle melody sounded like a lullaby and I closed my eyes naturally. Because of the well handling of the car despite its model, the shaking of the car felt like a cradle.

It was a night drive to an unknown destination.

As I was on the verge of falling asleep, the car slowly pulled to a stop.

When I made a quick glance, it was just an empty night road and what stood out aside from the equally spaced street lights were the lights of the running cars flashing by on the opposite lane.

"We're here."

Hiratsuka-sensei said so and got out of the car. Where is "here" exactly…? As I thought that, I got off as well.

Suddenly, my nose was assaulted by the smell of the sea. And then, after seeing the glow of the new city ahead, I guessed at the location. Nearby was the Bay of Tokyo and we were currently on top of the bridge hovering over the mouth to the Bay. For us Sobu High students, this was a spot where we would hold a marathon rally in February marked as a checkpoint. On the handrails of the bridge were the scribbles of couples and I remember scoffing at it very well.

When we went out to the sidewalk, Hiratsuka-sensei tossed me a can of coffee. I was close to dropping it due to how dark it was, but I somehow managed to catch it. The can I grabbed was still warm.

Hiratsuka-sensei leaned against her car and as she puffed her cigarette, she opened the can of coffee with one hand. That appearance of hers was oddly fitting.

“You look kind of cool.”

“I am trying to look good, after all.”

I said so with the intention of poking fun at her, but Hiratsuka-sensei replied back with a nihilistic smile. Oh please, if you make that kind of face, I’ll really end up thinking you’re cool.

Continuing to look at Hiratsuka-sensei was a bit embarrassing so I turned to look at the sea.

The night sea was entrenched in black. I could see the swaying of the water’s surface thanks to it being slightly lit up. It looked so gentle that it made me think that it wouldn’t happen a second time once it had calmed down.

As I stood fixedly at the water’s surface, Hiratsuka-sensei called out to me.

“So how are things going?”

What was she referring to? There was no contextual subject, so I couldn’t quite say, but if I thought about the time of the season right now, then I thought it was about the Christmas event.

“Things seem pretty bad.”

“…Fumu.”

Hiratsuka-sensei faced away and blew out smoke. She then turned her face towards me.

“What’s bad?”

“I’m not really sure what to say about that…”

“Well, just try talking.”

“Haa, then…”

As I thought about where I should start from, I opened my mouth.

First, the foremost problematic point that I needed to talk about was time. There was only a week left so there was no way to turn the situation around.

The next following problem was also the primary cause for all the lost time. And that was the problem of how we were proceeding along. On one hand, we had Tamanawa who unconditionally listened to opinions of others. On the other, we had Isshiki who sought them. Because these two were at the center, it took up a lot of time.

To improve the situation, we could either throw the task onto someone else or possibly adjust their mindset, but both seemed rather unlikely.

For the former, there wasn't anyone used to the position in the first place. The people who were just helping were acting reserved thinking that they should avoid going out to the front disregarding the student council president. Even the student council members in question were probably thinking they should stay below the president.

As for changing Isshiki and Tamanawa's mindset, that was difficult as well.

The time those two had been student president was shallow. That's why their lack of experience was something that couldn't be avoided. The problem was that as leaders, they didn't have a vision. They couldn't see a vision for success. But, instead, they could see one where they failed. They became the president and once they failed the burden with the big task of cooperating with another school and for the region, it would be over. They were probably afraid of that.

There were plenty of times where you'd trip over yourself on the big stage. Only the ones saying that failing was part of the experience were outsiders, for the actual deed was unpleasant to the person in question.

The people from the safe zone would speak of things like "try harder next time" and "everyone fails at some point". They'd say things like that. But there were times when there wasn't a next time because that first failure would carry over to the next opportunity, turning that into a failure as well. The words "it's okay to fail" were truly irresponsible words. The responsibility of failure was always something of no worth to the person who failed.

For those with a considerable imagination, they easily understood that there were things that they shouldn't fail at. It was likely that both Tamanawa and Isshiki were capable of that.

That's why they sought for people's opinions as well as incorporated them. All for the sake of sharing the responsibility when they failed.

It was doubtful anyone would say "it's your fault" directly to someone. But it was likely they would do so internally to console themselves.

The acts of reporting, contacting, consulting, compromising, and confirming were to increase the number of related parties, all just to share one's own responsibility. If they

could turn the entire failure into everybody's responsibility, they could reduce the burden on their hearts one by one.

They are unable to shoulder the responsibility themselves which is why they attempt to obtain the opinions of others.

And that was the reason why this event was stagnating right now. Who at the top or who at the bottom would shoulder the burden? For that not to have been decided was a mistake in the first place.

"Well, something like that I guess…"

I wasn't very confident that I was able to put everything properly into words. But I lengthily talked out my thoughts.

Hiratsuka-sensei listened from beginning to end in silence, but once I finished, she made an abrupt, complicated expression and nodded.

"…You can see quite well. You're impressive when it comes to reading into a person's mentality."

That's not it at all. If I was in the same position as them, that's how I would think. That was just my own selfish assumption. When I tried to say that, Hiratsuka-sensei shot up her index finger and took control. She then looked at my eyes and slowly spoke.

"However, you don't understand their feelings."

My breathing stopped. My voice, my words, and even a sigh wouldn't come out. It felt like she struck at the heart of the matter. I then realized the true identity behind the thing I, the thing Hikigaya Hachiman tried to understand, but couldn't.

It was supposed to have been something I was told a long while back. "You need to consider the feelings of others more. Even though you understand everything else, why don't you understand that?" It felt like I was told that.

Unable to answer, Hiratsuka-sensei spoke as she crushed her cigarette in her ashtray.

"A person's mentality and feelings aren't always equal. There are times the conclusion you arrive at is completely irrational and the reason is because of that… That's why, Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and you as well, come up with mistaken answers."

“…No, those two aren’t relevant right now, aren’t they?”

I was taken aback by the two names she suddenly brought up. Right now, I didn’t really want to talk or think about them. When I said so, Hiratsuka-sensei shot me a glare.

“At the very beginning, I was asking about those two.”

She said so with a displeased tone and lit another cigarette. True enough, she didn’t say anything specific. All I did was arbitrarily start ranting about the Christmas event.

“But, well, the true nature of both boils down to the same thing. The root of the problem is one thing… That’s the heart.”

Hiratsuka-sensei blew out smoke. The smoke turned into a hazy shape and quickly scattered.

The heart. Feelings. Thoughts.

My eyes chased the smoke that scattered into the air. I felt I might’ve been able to still see something if I did.

Still, that was just being conceited. In the end, I didn’t see anything at all. I thought I was thinking about the feelings of others, but I was only looking at the surface. I acted with the assumption on a truth that I only guessed at. How was that any different from self-satisfaction?

In that case, I probably would never understand.

“But… that’s not really something you can understand from just thinking about, isn’t it?”

Merits, demerits, risks, returns; if they were these things then I understood. I could understand.

Desire and self-protection, hatred from jealousy. I could analyze the mentality of the actions that were grounded on those abundant, repulsive emotions. That’s because I had plenty of those ugly feelings inside of me. That’s why it was simple to imagine. If they were similar things, then there was still room to understand it. I could explain using logic.

However, if there wasn’t, then it was difficult.

Without the concept of profit and loss, it was hard to imagine the feelings of people who went beyond logic and theory. I had too little to go on and above all else, I had committed too many mistakes up until now.

Good will, friendship, or even love; they were all things I had been mistaken with. I was sure that I was mistaken with them even now as I thought about them.

A mail would come, our bodies would come into contact accidently, we would smile at each other when our eyes meet in class, a rumor that someone liked me running amok, we would talk a lot even though our seats being next to each other was just a coincidence, we would always go home at the same time; during that, I was mistaken.

Even… Even in the off chance that I was correct about them.

I didn't have confidence I could continue believing in that. I could put aside all the agreeable judgment factors and pose every possible obstacle, but even so, that kind of thought wasn't something I could call genuine.

If it was something continually changing, then the correct answer didn't exist there. I thought you definitely wouldn't be able to bring out an answer.

Hiratsuka-sensei listened to my words and made a faint smile and after that, she focused on me with a strict look.

"Don't understand? Then think more. If you can only think by calculating, then keep doing so until you can't. Think of all the answers you can and destroy them one by one with the process of elimination. Whatever remains is your answer."

Her look was filled with passion. But what she was saying was irrational. No, it didn't even have logic to it.

For someone who could only make conjectures through reason and calculation, then he just had to see through it all until he couldn't anymore. She was saying to get rid of all the possibilities one by one through the process of elimination.

Just how inefficient and pointless was that? On top of that, there's no proof that there would be an answer. I was both shocked and surprised that I couldn't come up with any words.

"…Even so, there'll be things you just can't understand, won't there?"

“Then that means your calculations are wrong or you overlooked something. I guess that means you’ll have to change how you calculate things.”

Hiratsuka-sensei threw in a joke and nonchalantly spoke. Because she said something so obvious that I reflexively let out a dry laugh.

“You’re so absurd…”

“Fool. If you could calculate feelings, then we’d be in a digital age by now… The remaining answer that you couldn’t calculate is what they call the feelings of people.”

The tone she used to speak those words was rough, but kind.

Like Hiratsuka-sensei said, I thought there were things that couldn’t be calculated. Even if you tried, there were things like the pi number or the infinitely recurring decimal that existed.

However, that wasn’t something you use to abandon your thoughts. It’s exactly because you didn’t have an answer that you continued to think. That was far from repose, as it was more akin to torture.

Just imagining made chills run up my spine. Unknowingly, I was adjusting the collars of my coat. When I did, Hiratsuka-sensei chuckled as she looked at me.

“Well, I was mistaken quite a bit with my calculations too, so maybe that’s why I can’t get married, huh… Just a while back, my friend had a wedding ceremony…”

As she said that, Hiratsuka-sensei had a self-torturing smile somewhere. If it was like always, then this was where I would poke fun at her by saying something random.

But I didn’t feel like doing that today.

“No, it’s just that your partners don’t have good eyes.”

“Heh…? W-What’s with you so suddenly?”

Hiratsuka-sensei looked surprised and as she mumbled embarrassingly, she looked away.

But it wasn't like I was flattering her. If I was born ten years earlier and had met her ten years earlier, then I thought I would have fallen head over heels for her from the bottom of my heart. Although there really wasn't any meaning in that kind of supposition.

I couldn't help, but smile from my thoughts going nuts. Hiratsuka-sensei also amusingly laughed. After a period of laughing, she cleared her throat.

"W-Well, fine. You could call this my thanks, but… I'll give you a special hint."

After saying that, she turned to me with an expression with sincerity unlike her smiling one earlier. In response to her persuasive tone, I straightened my back and faced Hiratsuka-sensei. When I sent a look indicating I was ready to listen, Hiratsuka-sensei slowly spoke.

"It's to not mistake the point that you should be thinking about."

"Haa…"

So she said, but it didn't seem to be relevant. It was too abstract that it was more like a no hint. Hiratsuka-sensei tilted her head in contemplation when she looked at my face that didn't seem to understand.

"I suppose… For example, let's think about the reason why you're assisting Isshiki, not as the Service Club, but as an individual. Is this for the Service Club, or is it for Yukinoshita?"

In the abrupt example, the sudden name she brought up startled me. Reflexively, I faced Hiratsuka-sensei and she had a bitter smile.

"You'll understand if you just look. After the case with Isshiki, a report came from Yukinoshita… She didn't say anything about herself, but judging from how she was, I just thought it a possibility. Is that the same for you as well?"

"Aah, no, I wonder about that…"

I shot out some words as I dug around for the words I should've said, but Hiratsuka-sensei didn't wait and continued on.

"If you're holding the same thoughts, then you would arrive at an answer that kept your distance from them in order not to hurt them… possibly. That was just an example, however."

“…Well, I suppose so. It was just an example.”

It was just an example. I was told that and I answered with that. It was simply a case study and the things Hiratsuka-sensei said weren’t the truth for how I was now.

Hiratsuka-sensei then nodded at me in confirmation.

“But that’s not what you should be thinking about. In this case, what you should be thinking about is why you don’t want to hurt anyone. And the answer should immediately come to you. ——It’s because they’re dear to you that you don’t want to hurt them.”

As she looked at my eyes, Hiratsuka-sensei added those final words. It was as if she wouldn’t allow me to make an objection, let alone avert my eyes.

Hiratsuka-sensei’s face which was lit up by the orange street lights and the flashing by car lights looked lonesome somewhere. Then, she whispered in a soft, warmhearted voice.

“But you have to see, Hikigaya. Trying to not hurt others is something you can’t do. People are creatures who hurt others just by existing even if they’re not aware of it. Whether you’re living or dying, you’ll always be hurting someone. Once you’re involved, you’ll hurt someone, and even by not being involved, you might be hurting someone else as well…”

After saying that, Hiratsuka-sensei took out another cigarette. She stared at the cigarette and she continued further.

“However, if it’s someone you don’t care about, then it won’t bother you. What’s necessary is awareness. It’s exactly because you care that you’ll feel as if you had hurt someone.”

Once she finished, she finally put the cigarette in her mouth. The snapping sound of rocks rubbing against each other came from the lighter and it faintly lit up Hiratsuka-sensei’s face. Her eyes were closed as if she was asleep and it was a very gentle expression. She then let out a big breath along with smoke and added.

“To cherish someone means to have the resolve to hurt them.”

What she was looking up at was the sky.

I looked in the same direction as her, wondering what she was thinking at this moment. What was there was the slight glimpse of moonlight shining through the opening from the clearing of clouds at some point or another.

“That’s as far as I’ll give you for a hint.”

Saying that, Hiratsuka-sensei moved from the car she was leaning on and showed me a grinning smile. She then stretched.

“It’s because both parties think of each other that there are things they can’t obtain. However, that’s not something to be sad about. It might even be something to be proud of.”

That was very beautiful. But that was all there was to it. To be thinking about it yet unable to obtain it, for it to be in front of you yet your hands wouldn’t reach, that was surely painful. Then you might as well just give up on thinking about it and looking at it.

As I thought that, I couldn’t help but ask.

“…Isn’t that really hard?”

“Uh huh. It’s hard.”

When she said, Hiratsuka-sensei took a step closer and leaned on the car again.

“…But it’s possible. That’s how it was for me after all.”

Hiratsuka-sensei said so with a grin, a smile that looked determined somehow. It’s not like she would talk about it, but it looked like a lot happened in the past. I wasn’t sure if it was okay to ask her about it. Would she talk about it one day if I became slightly more of an adult? Noticing how I was looking forward to that, I reflexively averted my face along with a few abusive words.

“That’s a little arrogant of you to think other people can do it to just because you were able to do it, you know.”

“…What an uncute fellow.”

When she said so annoyingly, she brushed my head in an iron claw fashion. I could feel the pain in my skull and as I struggled, the strength suddenly went away. However, her hand was still on my head.

“…I suppose I’ll be honest with you.”

The tone of her voice was deeper than the one she used earlier to talk. Because my head was held in place, I could only move my eyes to look at Hiratsuka-sensei and she had a slightly sad smile.

“In truth, it probably doesn’t have to be you. At some point in the future, Yukinoshita might change. Someday, someone that can understand her might appear. There might be someone who would walk over to her side. The same could be said for Yuigahama as well.”

Exactly when would that be? Because it seemed so far in the future that it didn’t seem real, but it also did at the same time because it seemed so helplessly recent.

“I’m sure for you guys, you feel that your time now is everything. But that’s definitely not the case. Eventually, it’ll all make sense somewhere. That’s just how the world was made.”

Those words were probably correct. Someday, somewhere, someone would definitely step over the line. When I thought about that unsteady truth, I recalled the slight pain inside me and I twisted my body to brush it off.

At some point, the hand on my head was gone and was now on my shoulder. Hiratsuka-sensei’s voice sounded much closer than it did before.

“…It’s just that I feel that it would be great if that person was you. I’m wishing for you and Yuigahama to step over that line for Yukinoshita.”

“…No, even if you say something like that, that’s.”

In that instant when I tried to reply, Hiratsuka-sensei gently embraced my shoulder. The faint warmth from our closed distance caused me to lose my words. Stiffening up to that sudden movement, Hiratsuka-sensei looked into my face as she spoke.

“This period of time now isn’t everything… But there are things that you can only do now, things that only exist here. It’s now, Hikigaya… It’s now.”

I couldn’t look away from her moist eyes. Right now, I didn’t have an answer that could answer only to that earnest look. That’s why I stood there, unable to answer.

Hiratsuka-sensei’s hands that held my shoulders had more power in it.

“Think, struggle, stumble, and worry. ——Without those, it’s not genuine.”

When she said so, Hiratsuka-sensei quickly let go. And then she made that usual cool and refreshing smile indicating the lecture was over. With that, the stiffness had finally disappeared in my body.

The rain of words struck me and lodged in my chest were many, many voices. However, I wouldn't spit those out. This was probably something I had to think myself, filter, and then swallow.

That's why I'll say something different and in place of gratitude, abusive words.

"…But since you're suffering from it, you can't really call it genuine."

"You really aren't cute at all."

Hiratsuka-sensei amusingly laughed and hit my head from behind.

"…Now then, let's go home. Hop on board."

After saying that, Hiratsuka-sensei sat at the driver's seat. I answered with a "roger" and went around to the passenger's seat.

In the middle of that, I quickly looked up at the sky.

The moon that should've peeked out in the clearing of the clouds was already hidden. The night sea didn't see a single illumination and the chilly wind that pierced my cheeks was cold.

Even so, surprisingly, it didn't feel as cold as it should've been as a feeling of warmth still lingered in my body.

Chapter 6: Even so, Hikigaya Hachiman is

I sank onto the living room sofa and I could hear a click that cut into the ticking sound of the minute hand of the clock on the wall.

When I casually looked, the hour hand had struck midnight.

A considerable amount of time had passed since I was dropped off by Hiratsuka-sensei.

Komachi and my parents already had their dinner and were now shut away in their rooms. Kamakura was probably sleeping in Komachi's room right now.

Periodically, the kotatsu would make low buzzing noises possibly because it was an older model. It was left on even though there wasn't anyone using it. I stood up, cut off its power, and returned to the sofa.

The room being so chilly was conversely a big help. I wouldn't get sleepy and most of all, my head completely cleared up like the cold weather.

Hiratsuka-sensei most certainly did give me a hint. That was likely not limited to only today as it was also something she had continued to tell me up until now. But I must have overlooked it, mistook it, or even passed by it. That's why I had to think it over again, starting from the very beginning.

I had to reestablish and reconsider the problem once more.

The most recent and biggest obstacle was, of course, the Christmas collaboration event. Although I took on the task of helping, the present situation was near collapsing.

In addition to that, the problem of Isshiki Iroha became apparent. While I was the one who pushed the student council presidency onto her, Isshiki wasn't managing the student council very well.

Moreover, Tsurumi Rumi's situation was also tied in with this. I don't know what kind of effect my actions towards her during summer break at Chiba Village had on her. But I couldn't think of her current situation as something positive.

And then… And then, there was the problem with the Service Club.

But as far as this last problem's concerned, just thinking about it made my chest feel murky and something resembling a solution wouldn't come to mind. The expression that gave up after attempting looking for an opportunity, the smile that forcibly tried to be bright, and lastly, the words that should have been told to me all looped itself over and over in my head.

I ended up wasting a significant amount of time since earlier because my mind was stuck on those things. This was a problem I should leave for later.

Now that's been established, the other three problems in particular had goals clearly set in place so it was simple to understand.

The first one was to get Isshiki to perform her duties as the student council president through this event. Next was to enable Tsurumi Rumi to show that smile to anyone else even if she's alone. Furthermore, the event needed to be executed within the scope of what's realistically possible by managing the level of cooperation with Kaihin Sogo High including Tamanawa.

If these were achieved, then a temporary solution should be visible.

I continued to rearrange the problems from my head, digging around for that optimal solution as if I was planting my own death flags. What connected all of them was the Christmas collaboration event. The three problems were summed up with this.

I just needed to think of a way that would make this a success in an ideal manner.

But having gone through the work for this week, I was aware that this wasn't an easy feat. I didn't think I was capable of turning that situation around. I even talked with Tamanawa regarding whether there was anything that could be improved.

What should I do? Should I ask for help from someone?

If that was the case, the only one who I could ask would be Komachi.

But Komachi wasn't in a situation where she should be disturbed as a test taking student. For my little sister who was close to her exams in less than two months, I couldn't ask for her help. There was no way I could obstruct the turning point in her life.

Then, who else was there? Zaimokuza? If it's him, I could bother him without feeling too bad about it. He's probably free too. Still, considering we have multiple groups involved, I

didn’t think there was a way to get Zaimokuza to function properly. Not to mention he’s incapable of communicating with people as it was already so it’d be even worse with people from another school.

…No, I know it’s not Zaimokuza’s fault.

The responsibility and cause lay with me.

Just how weak was I?

Why was I so quick to try to rely on others? Just because I asked for help that one time, I was misunderstanding. And now I was immediately trying to depend on others.

Just when did I become so weak?

The bonds between people had to be a narcotic. You unwittingly became dependent all the while your heart deteriorates inside out. And then you ended up needing to rely on others and you eventually become unable to do things by yourself.

Then, was it possible that by intending to lend a hand to people that I was actually making them suffer instead? Was I giving birth to people who couldn’t stand on their own two feet unless they had help from someone?

Even though we were supposed to teach them how to catch fish and not give them one.

Something that could be easily given to someone was surely a fake. Something that could easily be given away was surely something that could easily be taken away by someone.

During that student council election, Komachi gave me a reason. I moved with the position that I was doing it for Komachi’s sake, to maintain the Service Club’s ongoing existence.

That’s why I was probably mistaken that time.

Even though I should have acted with an answer and reason that I found for myself.

Even now, I was looking for a reason to act from someone. For Isshiki’s sake, for Rumi’s sake, for the event’s sake.

Were they all really reasons why I would act? I feel like I’m mistaken about the prerequisites. The point I should be thinking about must be wrong.

If I were to correct what's right or wrong, then I needed to start from the beginning.

To this day, what have I been acting for? What was the reason? I'll trace back the events I had in mind earlier in reverse chronological order.

The reason the Christmas event needed to be a success was for Isshiki Iroha and Tsurumi Rumi's sake. And the reason why I was helping directly with the event was because I had pushed the role of presidency onto Isshiki during the student council election. And during that election, why I did that was to keep Yukinoshita and Yuigahama from becoming president. Why did I want to keep those two from becoming president? The reason I received from Komachi was grounds for me to move, but the real reason why I moved was…

Was because there was something I wanted.

In the past, it was likely that was the one and only thing that I wanted and that I didn't need anything else, even going as far as to detesting them. But being unable to completely obtain it, I started to think it didn't exist.

Yet, that was because I felt like I had seen it. That I even may have touched upon it.

That's why I was mistaken.

I was able to make the question. Now I need to think. About what my answer is.

I didn't know how much time I spent thinking. But the night dyed in blue began to dissolve as the sky faintly proceeded to whiten.

I was thinking the entire time, yet I couldn't think of a single way, plan, or strategy. No matter what logic, theory, reason, and sophistry I could think of, nothing came to mind.

——That's why, this was probably it. This was probably my answer.

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It was after school in the classroom. I stretched my body at my desk. When I slightly moved my body, there were cracking noises at my neck and waist.

In the end, I headed to school without getting much sleep yesterday night. Once I arrived at my desk, I fell flat on top of it and most of my classes went through one ear and out the other.

However, my conscience right now was awfully clear.

I was still half doubtful of the answer I thought of that took the entire night. I wasn't sure if it really was correct or not.

However, I couldn't think of anything else.

I made one last big sigh and stood up.

My destination was just one place.

I left the classroom and walked down the hallway.

The bleak and deserted hallway didn't bother me. For a while now, my blood flow had been uncomfortably fast and the temperature of my body was pointlessly high. The sound of the wind crashing against the windows and the voices from those in the athletic clubs sounded so distant that I couldn't hear them. I rehearsed the words that I needed to say over and over in my chest that I couldn't hear anything else.

I could see the door that led to where I was heading. The door was shut closed with a severity in dreadful silence.

I stood before the door and slightly took a deep breath. I then knocked on the door two to three times. Even though I had entered this room to this day, I had never knocked on the door. However, in accordance with my objective today, following this formality was proper.

I waited for a bit, but there wasn't an answer from inside.

I knocked one more time.

"Come in…"

I could hear a weak voice coming from past the door. Up until now, I never paid it any attention, but this was how you would hear their voices past this single door, huh? After getting acknowledged, I placed my hand on the handle.

The door made sliding sounds as it opened. The door was heavy. Was the door really this heavy before? I focused my strength and forced the door open.

When I went inside, the considerably surprised faces were lined up in the same usual place.

“Hikki. For you to be knocking, what’s wrong?”

Yuigahama Yui had her cellphone gripped in her hands like always and had a puzzled look.

Yukinoshita Yukino marked her position in her unfinished book with a bookmark and placed it on top of the desk. She cast her eyes downwards with her attention focused on the table.

Yukinoshita whispered a few words in a small voice that weren’t directed at anyone.

“…I told you that you didn’t have to force yourself to come.”

I silently listened to those words to the end all just so that voice wouldn’t slip past my ears.

“…I just had some business here.”

When I answered briefly, Yukinoshita didn’t say anything more as I stood still. As we did that, a silence befell the room as if an angel had descended.

“W-Why don’t you have a seat?”

Both Yukinoshita and I looked mutually at Yuigahama as she spoke up with determination. I nodded to her and pulled the closest seat over. After I took a seat, directly in front of me were Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. Aah, this was the first time I realized that the people who came here for requests and consultations would always see this kind of scenery. The seat I had always occupied to this day was in a diagonal position from where Yukinoshita’s sitting and was empty.

“Is something wrong…? You seem kind of different than usual too?”

It’s a given that I was different from usual. After all, I wasn’t here today as a club member.

The answer that I thought the entire time, over and over, was just one.

Once you were mistaken, then that was your answer. You couldn't solve the same problem again.

Even so, you should have been able to ask it again. That's why, this time, I'll start accumulating correct answers one by one from the beginning through the correct way and correct course of action. I didn't think of any other methods beyond that.

After I let out a big sigh, I focused on Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

"I have a single request I want to make."

The words that I continued to repeat over and over in my heart came out a lot smoother than I had imagined.

Maybe that was why. Yuigahama listened to that and made a relieved face.

"Hikki, you're going to talk to us about it properly, huh…"

Yuigahama made a warmhearted smile. But Yukinoshita had a completely different expression. Only her gaze was directed my way, but it was like as if she wasn't even looking at me. When I received that stare, my voice grew weaker little by little.

"It's about the Christmas event Isshiki mentioned before, but it's a lot worse than I imagined. So I wanted to ask for your help…"

After I managed to finish my words, Yukinoshita dropped her gaze and hesitated to speak.

"But…"

"No, I know what you want to say."

Before Yukinoshita could deny things after her conjunction, I interrupted her and spoke in rapid succession.

"It was something I did on my own and I even said that it wouldn't be helping Isshiki at all too. But the one who pushed the presidency onto Isshiki was me. I understand that the main cause lies with me."

If I was refused here, that would be bad. I didn't have anything that would convince Yukinoshita, but even so, I couldn't have her rejecting me now. For now, I listed a number of reasons that came to mind.

"Do you remember the elementary kid from Chiba Village? That girl's the same as always you see…"

"Aah… Rumi-chan, I think?"

Yuigahama made a difficult face. That one incident wasn't a pleasant memory for anyone. Not a single person was saved and everyone involved was forced with the worst result.

That was the result of my methods up until now. But there, I was also mistaken again. That's why, in order not to be mistaken again this time, I desperately continued my words.

"That's why I want to do something. I know what I've been doing up until now was the main cause and I realize it's a very selfish story on my part. Even so, I still want to make the request."

After I finished speaking, I looked at Yukinoshita and her fist she had placed on the table squeezed tightly.

"So, it's your fault. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"…Well, I can't deny it."

Directly or indirectly, whatever the case, the underlying cause was the doing of my actions. That was just the plain truth. When I answered, Yukinoshita casted down her eyes and bit her lips.

"I see…"

Yukinoshita spoke with a voice that resembled a sigh and lifted her head. Her slightly moist eyes seized me for a split second, but she quickly averted them. She took a moment as if looking for the words to say and Yukinoshita continued with a cold tone.

"…If you think it's primarily your own responsibility that it turned out that way, then it's a problem that you should solve by yourself, right?"

My breath stopped for an instant to those words. But I knew I couldn't stay silent to that and somehow managed to squeeze out a hoarse voice.

"…Right. My bad, forget what I said."

With this, I had nothing left. There wasn't anything else I had thought up. Besides, if anything, what Yukinoshita had said was more fundamentally correct.

That's why it could convince me, at least theoretically.

I was about to stand up, looking ready to leave the club room. But at that moment, a passionate voice called out to me.

"Wait."

That voice reverberated in the quiet and cold club room.

Yuigahama looked at me and Yukinoshita with damp eyes.

"That's not it. Why, why is it turning out like that? It's weird."

Yuigahama said so with a trembling voice. Although the two of us were convinced logically, she judged that it was wrong without a single reason.

My cheeks lightly loosened in response to that appearance that befitted Yuigahama. With that feeble smile, although I was intending to say in an admonishing tone to somebody, I slowly spoke as if I was explaining to a small child.

"No, it's not weird at all… I'll do something regarding myself. It's an obvious thing to do."

"…I suppose so."

Yukinoshita paused slightly before agreeing with me. When Yukinoshita and I said so, Yuigahama shook her head fiercely and rebutted.

"That's not it, what you two are saying are completely different."

When I looked at Yuigahama who had a face that was about to break into tears, I could feel my chest tighten sharply and it made me want to avert my eyes. However, her kind voice wouldn't let me do so.

“Like, you see, it’s not just your responsibility alone Hikki. I mean, Hikki was the one who thought it through and Hikki was the one who went through with it. But that’s how it is for us too. We pushed everything onto you…”

“…No, that’s different.”

I looked for the words I should be telling to Yuigahama whose head was hanging heavily. It’s not like it was pushed onto me. In fact, it helped me quite a lot.

However, Yuigahama’s expression still looked like it was on the verge of crying as she lifted her head to focus on me.

“It’s not. Hikki’s not the only one at fault that caused things to become like this, I am, too…”

Yuigahama looked at Yukinoshita’s face. That gaze implied that there was one more person responsible.

Yukinoshita received her gaze directly. However, she didn’t say anything. She tightly squeezed her lips as if accepting the blame in resignation.

Yuigahama mumbled her words as her voice dropped as if she was pressured by that stare.

“…I think what Yukinon is saying is a little unfair.”

Her voice was docile, but Yuigahama’s gaze was firmly directed at Yukinoshita. Her eyes which increased in sincerity even had aggressiveness to it.

Yukinoshita didn’t look away from that stare. She took a moment, worrying whether to speak or not and she spoke with a small, but sharp cold tone.

“…So you’ll say that now… You’re unfair too.”

When Yukinoshita spoke, Yuigahama slightly bit her lips. The two exchanged their gazes as if they were glaring at each other.

“Wait, I didn’t want to talk about that.”

Looking for the culprit who was at fault wasn’t something I was here for. I didn’t want some self-aggrandizing conclusion where everyone was at fault. I was supposed to have come here to talk about something even more different.

I wasn't here because I wanted to see Yukinoshita and Yuigahama with these quarrelling expressions at all.

Despite that, my still voice didn't reach them. They both exchanged reserved gazes at each other, but even so, the words that came flowing out wouldn't stop.

Yuigahama's white throat shook and she swallowed her breath. She looked at Yukinoshita with moist eyes and continued her words one after the other.

"It's because Yukinon didn't say anything… There will be things that won't be understood if you don't say anything."

"…You didn't say anything either. You were always trying to smooth things over."

Yukinoshita's voice didn't have any warmth to them. That expression was like a frozen caricature that simply laid out the truths in disinterest. She was probably speaking of the time we spent together these past few days.

"That's why, if you, if both of you wanted it, then…"

Yukinoshita's added murmur with her small voice that sounded like it would disappear caused Yuigahama to choke on her voice.

This cold and hollow room simply waited patiently for the end of time to come. Yukinoshita had felt it herself.

That fleeting nonsense was something both Yuigahama and I swallowed. That might've been something that even Yukinoshita had forcefully demanded for.

Everyone was the same by not saying the truth. We were here unable to say the one thing that we wanted.

Both she and I took it too lightly. Both of each other and of how we were to each other.

Even though our ideals and understanding were completely different too.

"…We won't understand unless we say it, huh?"

The words Yuigahama mentioned earlier pulled at my chest. There were things you wouldn't understand if you didn't say anything. That's without a doubt. However, if you said it, would you really understand?

The words I slipped out caused Yuigahama to face my way. Yukinoshita continued to look downwards. Yuigahama gaze urged me to continue on and I spoke.

"But there're also things that won't be understood even if you said something."

"That's…"

Yuigahama's mouth depressingly distorted. It almost looked like tears would trickle down from the corners of her eyes. That's why I felt I had to speak as gently as possible.

"…Even if you said something, I don't think it would've convinced me. I'm sure I would've just ended up thinking that there might be something behind it, that there were reasons why you were saying it."

Yukinoshita tended to be a girl of few words while Yuigahama would mumble words to try to brush things off.

On top of that, I had the habit of reading behind people's words.

That's why when Yukinoshita said she was going to run as a candidate, even if she had said it out of instinct, I probably wouldn't have taken the meaning of those words as they were. I would think there were other factors involved and try to dig out the real intent behind them only to be mistaken in the end.

People see only what they want to see as well as hear only what they want to hear. I was no exception.

Yuigahama rubbed her eyes and then strongly lifted her head.

"But if we just properly talked it out, if we just talked with Hikki more, then I…"

"That's not it."

I gently shook my head to Yuigahama's words.

“If you don’t say it, you won’t understand.” Anyone could say that. Even if they didn’t even know what it was or what they were trying to convey, they would swallow the words they borrowed from some stranger somewhere.

Even if you said something, there would still be things untold, and there were things that would break just from saying it.

“To say ‘if you say it, then you’ll understand’ is being arrogant. It’s the self-satisfaction of the person in question who said it, the conceit of the one who was told it… There’s a lot going on and it’s not always the case that you’d understand each other from talking it over. That’s why words aren’t what I want.”

As I said that, I could feel my body slightly shaking. I quickly shot my glance outside the window and it was gradually becoming evening. The room became slightly colder because of that.

Yukinoshita was listening in silence the entire time, but she was holding her shoulders as if trying to warm her body.

Yuigahama sniffed and wiped her eyes. She then spoke with a teary voice.

“But if you don’t say anything, then you’ll never understand…”

“I suppose so… It’s an illusion to think you’ll understand something even if nothing is said. But… But I…”

I searched for the words to follow and my eyes wandered.

However, in my field of vision weren’t the words I was looking for. The only things I could see were eyes that became red from rubbed in a panic and the side profile with lowered eyelashes looking downwards.

Suddenly, that scenery blurred.

“I…”

Even though I started again, I still couldn’t find the words.

What should I say? I already said what I wanted. The words that I had felt and thought were already spoken. I asked again and I piled things from scratch. I should have thought up of the words for the sake of that. There really wasn't anything left. I was all out of options.

——Aah, I see. In the end, the things I tried to say, no matter where I was and no matter how much I thought, were only thoughts, logic, calculations, measures, and tricks.

Despite that, I was still looking for the words that I needed to say, that I wanted to say even though I didn't completely understand after thinking. Yet it's not like they would understand even if I said it. Yet it'd be pointless just saying it too.

I didn't want words. But there certainly was something that I wanted.

And they were definitely not things like to understand each other, to get along with each other, to want to talk to each other, and to stay together. I didn't want to be understood. I was aware that I wasn't understood and I didn't think I wanted to be understood. What I wanted was something more cruel and harsh. I wanted to understand. I want to understand. I want to know. I want to know and be relieved. I want to gain peace of mind. Because I was terrified of things I didn't understand. To want to completely understand everything was a self-righteous, dictatorial, and arrogant wish. It was absolutely wretched and repulsive. I couldn't help but be disgusted at myself for having such a desire.

However, if, if we thought the same way.

If we could force that unsightly self-satisfaction onto each other and if a relationship that allowed that arrogance were to exist.

I knew that being able to do that was absolutely impossible. I knew that it was something that my hands wouldn't be able to reach.

The grapes that my hands wouldn't reach were undoubtedly sour.

But I didn't need sweet fruits that were like a lie. I didn't need things like a fake understanding and a deceptive relationship.

What I wanted was that sour grape.

Even if it's sour, even if it's bitter, even if it's disgusting, even if it's full of poison, even if it didn't exist, even if I couldn't lay my hands on it, even if I wasn't allowed to wish for it.

“Even so…”

I understood that the voice that leaked out at some point was shaking.

“Even so, I…”

I desperately held in the feeling of wanting to break into a sob. Even though I had swallowed my voice and words, they continued to come out in bits and pieces. My teeth would grind noisily and the words were squeezed out on their own.

“I want something genuine.”

The corners of my eyes were hot and my sight was blurring. I could only hear the sound of my breathing.

Both Yukinoshita and Yuigahama looked at my face with a surprised one of their own.

How unsightly. To demand things of other people in such a tearful and pathetic voice. I didn’t want to accept this kind of self. I didn’t want to show it. I didn’t want anyone to see it. Even the things I said were incoherent. There wasn’t any logic or cause and effect anywhere. This was just a bunch of nonsense.

My wet and hot breaths caused my throat to shake. During that, I suppressed my voice that I felt was going to leak out.

“Hikki…”

Yuigahama called me and gently extended her hand. However, the distance between us wasn’t close enough for her to come into contact. Her stretched hand wouldn’t reach and she weakly dropped it.

It wasn’t just her hand. I wasn’t sure if her words had reached me either.

What exactly could you understand from these words? They’d never understand even if I said them. But having said them was self-satisfaction itself. Or possibly, it was the deception that we detested. It might just have been completely worthless sham.

However, no matter how much I thought, an answer didn’t come out. I didn’t even know what I should do. That’s why the last thing left was this worthless wish of mine.

“I… don’t understand.”

Yukinoshita said so in a quiet voice. Her hands that held her shoulders grasped harder and her painful expression distorted.

“I’m sorry.” Yukinoshita quickly muttered in a small voice and stood up from her seat. She then headed quickly for the door without a single glance at us.

“Yukinon!”

Yuigahama tried to chase after her and stood up. But worried about me, she turned around.

The only thing I did was watch.

I watched Yukinoshita leave the room in a daze with my blurred vision and I let out the pent up hot breaths in my chest.

It was finally over. Somewhere, I might have felt relieved.

“Hikki.”

Yuigahama grabbed my arm as I spaced out. She then pulled and tried to force me to my feet. My face was close to Yuigahama’s. Yuigahama looked directly into my eyes with her eyes that were mixed with tears.

“…We have to go.”

“No, but…”

My conclusion was already out. The words I needed to say and the thoughts I wanted to get across were no more. I let out a self-derisive smile and I averted my face from Yuigahama.

However, Yuigahama didn’t withdraw.

“We’re going to go together…! Yukinon said she didn’t understand. I think she probably doesn’t even know why she doesn’t understand… Even I don’t understand at all. But! But we can’t let it end like this while we don’t understand anything! Now’s the only time. That’s the first time I’ve seen Yukinon like that! That’s why we need to go now…”

When she said that, she let go of my arm and then grasped my hand. The hand she strongly squeezed mine with was hot.

Again, Yuigahama pulled my hand along. It wasn't as strong as the pull from earlier. It was a frailty that was trying to confirm and test something. I was sure even Yuigahama didn't know what to do either. With our hands still together, she looked up at my face anxiously.

That's why I gently brushed her hands away.

From that, Yuigahama's hands dropped weakly and her face was about to burst into tears.

But that's not what it was. It's not that I didn't want to take someone's hand because I was uneasy. It's not that I wanted someone to support me because I couldn't walk on my own. To hold hands was something for an even more different occasion.

Right now, I'll walk with my own feet.

"…I can walk on my own. Let's go."

After I said that, I headed for the door.

"Y-Yeah!"

From behind was the following footsteps and voice. After confirming that, I opened the door and went into the hallway.

When I did, the figure of a person stiffly in place quickly came into view. It was Isshiki Iroha.

"Ah, Senpai… aah, um, I thought I would call out to you, but…"

Isshiki was in a fluster as she tried to say things, but right now wasn't the time to be bothered with Isshiki.

"Iroha-chan? Sorry, we can talk later, okay?"

Yuigahama apologized and quickly ran off. I was about to follow after her as well, but Isshiki stopped me.

"Se-Senpai, there's no meeting today! I came here to say that… A-Also,"

"Yeah, I got it."

I didn't listen to Isshiki's words until the end and I answered randomly. I was about to dash off towards Yuigahama who was waiting ahead. But there, the sleeve of my blazer was pulled on.

When I took a look to see what it was, Isshiki had a resigned face and let out a sigh. She then pointed upwards.

"Please listen to me until the very end… Yukinoshita-senpai's above! Above!"

"Sorry. Thanks."

After I thanked Isshiki, I quickly called out to Yuigahama.

"Yuigahama, she's above."

Yuigahama quickly rushed back and we both climbed up the stairs of the special building.

Above likely was referring to the open hallway.

The hallway that connected the school building and the special building was something like a rooftop with a missing roof on the fourth floor. During the winter season, this floor wasn't particularly used by the students during this time of the season because it was exposed to the cold winds.

After we climbed the stairs, we made it to the plateau of the open hallway.

The afterglow from the west was obstructed by the special building and the evening sun dyed past the glass of the hallway. The sky in the east was beginning to darken.

The open corridor was in the rift of the twilight and Yukinoshita was there.

Yukinoshita was leaning against the handrail and seemed to be in a daze. Her hair danced with the chilly wind. The evening light illuminated her lustrous black hair and the whiteness of her skin. Her eyes shaded with anxiety were directed far towards the cluster of buildings that began to show its night brilliance.

"Yukinon!"

Yuigahama rushed over to Yukinoshita. I followed after her, walking along slowly. I was still catching my breath because we had run straight up the stairs without resting.

“Yukinoshita…”

I called her with a disconnected voice, but Yukinoshita didn’t turn around.

Even so, it looked my voice had reached her as she spoke in a shuddering, small voice.

“…I don’t understand.”

She voiced those words again.

When she uttered them, my feet stopped.

The chilly wind blew past as if dividing us apart. Yukinoshita slowly turned around as if that wind was agitating to her. Her moist eyes didn’t have any strength as she stood there strongly squeezing her clutched hands that pressed against her bosom.

Yukinoshita asked me with a raspy voice, not bothering to adjust her hair that was disturbed by the wind.

“What in the world is that genuine thing that you asked for?”

“That’s…”

Even I didn’t understand it too well. To this day, I have yet to see it for myself, let alone touch it. That’s why I was still here, not knowing whether that thing was something I could say “that was it”. Of course, there was no way that other people would understand. Even so, it’s something that I was wishing for.

As I stood there unable to answer, as if to make it up for me, Yuigahama took a step forward and placed her hand on Yukinoshita’s shoulder.

“Yukinon, it’s alright.”

“…What’s alright?”

When Yukinoshita added, Yuigahama made a troubled but an embarrassed grin.

“Truthfully, I don’t understand it all that well either…”

Yuigahama rubbed her dango hair trying to play it off and she retracted her laugh. She took one step closer to Yukinoshita and she placed her other hand on Yukinoshita's shoulder. And then, Yuigahama gazed at Yukinoshita directly opposite of her.

"That's why if we talk about it more, then we'll definitely understand it more. But we'll probably still not understand too. So with that, we'll probably never understand, but, maybe doing that, we'll understand or something… I guess I don't really get it… But, but you see… you see, I…"

On Yuigahama's cheeks were a flow of tears.

"I don't really like how things are right now…"

Yuigahama said and hugged Yukinoshita's shoulders that she pulled closer and began to sob as if the string of tension was cut. Unable to embrace her back, Yukinoshita let out a sigh and her lips trembled.

I looked away from those two for just a little.

No matter how much I thought, that answer, those words were the only thing that came out. Just how could she, how could Yuigahama say those words like that?

Like someone who could only wield a theory drenched with a contradicting falsehood in a roundabout way?

Like someone who couldn't put into words properly their thoughts and instead stayed silent?

Nothing could be conveyed without words, yet there was a mistake because there were words. So what exactly could we understand then?

Yukinoshita Yukino's held beliefs. Yuigahama Yui's sought relationship. Hikigaya Hachiman's desired genuine thing.

Just how different were these, I was here without knowing.

However, those honest tears were enough to tell me. That this time right now wasn't a mistake at all.

Yukinoshita caressed Yuigahama's hair while she was pressed against her shoulders.

“Why are you the one crying…? You really are… unfair.”

After saying that, Yukinoshita pressed her face against Yuigahama’s shoulders like an embrace. I could overhear the soft sobbing.

Both Yukinoshita and Yuigahama supported each other as they stood there. Eventually, Yukinoshita let out a big sigh and raised her face.

“…Hikigaya-kun.”

“Yeah.”

After I answered, I waited for her to continue. Yukinoshita wasn’t looking my way. Even so, a resolute and strong will in her voice was conveyed to me.

“I will accept your request.”

“…Sorry.”

I slightly bowed my head. It was such a short word, yet my voice was close to shivering. When I lifted my head, Yuigahama also lifted her head from Yukinoshita’s shoulders.

“I’ll help too…”

Yuigahama turned her face to me and said so with a trembling tone. When our eyes met, she showed me a smile with damp eyes.

“…Thanks.”

As I said that, I reflexively shot a meaningless look up at the sky.

I could see the orange sky blotting across.

Chapter 7: Someday, Yuigahama Yui will

I collapsed onto the sofa after I made it home.

After what happened, we went back to the club room in silence. We said our goodbyes and headed home with the lingering awkwardness of being unable to say anything and embarrassment.

Yukinoshita left straight away indicating she would return the key, I headed for the bike parking area as if running away, and Yuigahama hurriedly ran to the bus stop. It felt like we were only able to hold conversations that lasted a couple of words between the three of us.

As I sank into the sofa, I thought back on today's events.

Why did I blurt out those embarrassing words…?

Uaaaah! I want to die! I really want to dieeeee! I don't want to go to school tomorroooow! You're an idiot, aren't you!? You're an idiot, aren't you! Idiooot! Idiooot! Uooooooooooon!

As I screamed within the depths of my mind and made deep groaning noises, I tumbled all over. Of course, since the sofa wasn't that big, it took about three and a half turns before I was on the floor.

Upon hitting the floor, our pet cat Kamakura flew out from the nearby kotatsu in surprise from the thud. He noisily skittered in circles about the room before dashing out of the living room like the Zvezda[55].

I ended up having these super, worthless thoughts like how our cat's scampering was more dynamic than I had thought, and how cheetahs were a variety of cats, and how Peter[56] was totally Ikehata Shinnosuke.

I was lying face down on top of the carpet as I was.

"…I want to die."

I murmured in a tiny voice.

There were two levels to flashback trauma. First, you'd be visited in high tension by a destructive urge. After that, you'd get assaulted by low tension melancholy.

I would go through repetitions of thrashing about, agonizing, and then stopping dead in my tracks like when a puppet's strings were cut. When I was close to thinking I was dying, I'd realize that I was still alive and continue to thrash madly again like a cicada. An insect, that's what I was.

After going through bouts of suffering from facing myself, I accepted defeat for just a little. When I let out a big sigh and rolled myself over, my eyes met with Komachi's, who seemed to have come into the living room just now and was standing before the door looking dumbfounded.

"…What's wrong, onii-chan?"

Komachi asked me, half shocked and half uneasy. But right now, I didn't feel like accompanying my little sister regardless of how cute she was. I abruptly turned my face away in a pouty manner.

"Leave me alone. Onii-chan's in the middle of an identity crisis right now."

When I told her with a sluggish and melancholic voice, Komachi let out an exaggerated sigh.

"Look here, onii-chan."

She called out to me formally so I moved only my neck and looked at Komachi. When I did, her eyes became half closed along with her mouth distorting into an upside down "v' shape. And with that weird expression, she blurted something out.

"Identity? Haaa? Most of the time those who blabber about individuality tend to be the ones without them. In the first place, a little change here and there isn't something you can call individuality."

Her face was weird, but what she was saying was unusually sound. Hey, are you serious? It's like she said. I totally got convinced instinctively there. But the way she was speaking with that face was a little irritating.

"Komachi-chan, what's with those words of yours? It's kind of rude, you know? Also, your face is weird."

Because my sister suddenly spoke so rudely, I asked her courteously with the intention of remonstrating her. When I did, Komachi's temples twitched as if something had cracked from hearing the word "weird" and she spoke in a very angry demeanor.

“…It’s an impression of onii-chan.”

“Not similar at all...”

Although I said that, I never really did pay any attention to my own characteristics. Eh, was I really that kind of irritating fellow? Objectively, my eyes were opened for the first time to this shocking truth. Wasn’t I, like, more intellectual and cool in a nihilistic way somehow? No?

Huuuuuh? Hooow weird… Seriooously? I was hit by the light shock and when I groaned, Komachi came up next to me and sat on the sofa.

“I don’t know what happened, but there’s like no way you can fix that rebellious personality this late in the game. You’re gomii-chan[57] you know, gomii-chan.”

As she said that, Komachi rolled me around with the soles of her feet as I was turned over on the floor. She really was treating me like trash. But those feet of hers suddenly stopped. Komachi rested her cheeks on her knees and giggled as she looked down on me.

“But I like that kind of onii-chan quite a lot though. Ah, that just now was super high in Komachi points!”

She ended her words with a first-rate smile. Aah, the way she would say one word too much while she tried to hide her embarrassment might’ve resembled someone.

“…Thanks for that. I like this kind of me quite a lot too. That just now was super high in Hachiman points.”

“What’s that about…?”

I ignored the shocked Komachi and stood straight up.

At last, I made up my mind. Tomorrow, I’ll probably remember what happened today and agonize and suffer over how embarrassing it was. I’ll probably even go through flashbacks and writhe in place about it later down the line too.

But this was fine. That kind of past created who I am now, someone that even Komachi said she liked very much. Don’t go calling a person’s memories a scar as you please now. This was what you call my charm point.

I think I'll definitely come to like this charming me, littered with so many charm points.

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It was the following morning after getting convinced in my own way as I rolled about at my house.

I woke up at the same usual time, had my breakfast, and commuted to school with my bike.

Or that's how it was supposed to go, but as I got closer to school, my feet that pedaled grew weaker, where I ultimately barely managed to slip into class before being late.

…Yeah, like really, it's just not possible. For one thing, my personality wasn't ever the type to just sweep all that stuff under the rug in just one day.

As I moaned internally, not making excuses to anyone, I continued to fall forward onto my desk. For now, I was making sure to be super careful of getting anywhere near Yuigahama because it was too embarrassing.

Even so, Yuigahama seemed to be rather mindful of me as our eyes would meet accidentally during the morning homeroom and even during class.

When they did, I would quickly avert my eyes and take a sleeping posture.

What the heck is this? Really, what the heck is this…?

I would repeatedly chant that like I would a Buddhist prayer when I was paralyzed as I thrust my head into my opened notebook. During break, I would wander aimlessly to the bathroom and vending machines and during lunch break, I would eat my lunch at my usual spot while muttering "it's cold, it's cold" over and over.

Still, even though the clock I thought was rather slow given all that happened, it was surprisingly fast today.

When I noticed, it was after school.

At last, this time had finally arrived.

But if I loitered around here for too long, Yuigahama who was talking with Miura and the others right now might come over to invite me to head to club together. That's, a little, problematic, I mean, it's kind of embarrassing.

Yuigahama didn't approach me at all the entire day as if she had assumed something from my attitude or that she had something in mind. But it was a different story if it was after school.

Before it turned into that, I had better leave the classroom.

I sluggishly walked down the hallway that continued from the school building to the special building.

Honestly, my feet were considerably heavier than the following morning after confessing and getting rejected in middle school. Thinking on it, I was more or less composed because I had a good idea of the reactions I'd get. They would either make me the butt of magnificent jokes or possibility, they'd do the "cheerfully act like normal and pretend not to care" appeal, but in fact couldn't at all because they were too busy making super strained laughs. Good grief, it felt like I wasn't getting ignored in the least.

Although that kind of pre-established response would've been comfortable in itself.

But I didn't know what kind of responses to expect from those two.

As I thought while walking, I ended up arriving at the front of the room. I thought I was walking rather slowly, but was this spot really that close? Normally, I'd at least shoot a single glance outside the window, but it didn't seem to grab my attention today.

I let out a sigh as I stood in front of the door… I want to go home. That thought flashed by in my head. But the one who made the request for help was me. The choice of withdrawing from here didn't exist.

I braced myself and slid the door of the room open.

The door was unlocked and because the sun was still high up, the room was filled with light. The curtains were left open. The unused desks and seats were piled on top of each other, but the three seats and single table were there, no different from usual. And sitting in one of the chairs was Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita lifted her head from the book she was reading. She spoke with her typical and unchanged composed expression.

“Hello.”

“Ah, yeah.”

Yukinoshita’s reaction was more normal than I had thought that it felt a bit anticlimactic. So it was essentially something that bothered only the person in question while it didn’t bother the people around him. It was a prime example of being overly self-conscious.

A little relieved, I sat in the seat diagonal from Yukinoshita’s and took out a book from my bag. I opened the book to where the bookmark was placed, but I couldn’t remember what I had read at all. When I flipped back the pages, I eventually spotted familiar sentences.

It looked like I was finally going to get some real reading done after a long time.

The peaceful time where Yukinoshita and I said nothing continued. Occasionally, the sound of pages turning and coughing could be heard. But the continued coughing eventually bothered me. When I casually looked, Yukinoshita coughed one more time before speaking up.

“Um,”

Yukinoshita coughed again as if trying to brush off her slightly cracked voice. She made a glance at me to see how I was, but when our eyes met, she quickly averted her eyes.

“…Um, regarding today, could I ask you for the place and time?”

That’s right. Even after I entered the room, I lost the timing to speak up, but right now, I was requesting the Service Club to help me with the Christmas event. So I needed to explain what was going on. But we were missing one more person. We should probably wait for her.

“Aah, right… Do you mind if we wait for Yuigahama to get here first?”

“…I suppose so. That’ll be double the work, after all.”

Yukinoshita dropped her eyes to her book and said in a small voice. Since then, Yukinoshita didn't say a single word and I didn't say anything in particular either. I thought this silent time would continue again for a while longer.

But that silence was buried by the sound of the door being loudly slid open.

"Yahallo!"

The one who came in especially energetic saying that was Yuigahama.

"…Yeah."

"Hello."

When all of us exchanged our greetings, Yuigahama made a satisfied smile and headed for the seat she always sat at. And when she made it up to her seat, she went into thought for a little and noisily dragged her seat towards Yukinoshita. That seat apparently seemed a lot lighter than I had thought.

After Yuigahama adjusted the position of her seat, she let out an "ehehe" laugh as she sat.

"…Close."

When Yukinoshita let out a murmur with a small, troubled voice, she slightly moved her seat away. After that, Yuigahama followed her in pursuit by closing the distance Yukinoshita opened by moving her seat again.

"…Um, Yuigahama-san… Could you move away a little bit?"

Yukinoshita said so reservedly and Yuigahama's expression turned into a frown. She then moved her seat slightly away, put her hands on her knees, and looked down.

"Ah… Okay, I guess so…"

"Um, that's not what…"

Seeing Yuigahama acting like that, Yukinoshita looked like she wanted to say something, but went quiet.

It was an exchange that still felt uncomfortable somewhere. Even I felt tired from just watching them.

Well, we did have those superficial exchanges for a while now and we did have that mess yesterday as well. It might be a little difficult to try to get on good terms with each other like before so quickly. Or so I was saying about them, but even I didn't know how to properly deal with them either.

I didn't know what the correct answer was right now, but I want to believe that this time now was much more alive than that frozen time. In any case, I needed to do what I had to do.

When I tried to look for the timing to talk to the two, as expected, I had coughed several times already.

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After a rough explanation of the outline of the Christmas collaboration event and its current situation, we headed to the community center as scheduled.

Whether it was in the room or on the way there, the only conversations we had were business related. As far as the word count in the conversations was concerned, I got the feeling that those superficial conversations we had before had more…

As I pushed my bike along, the two followed me from behind, walking normally. After progressing along for a while, Isshiki could be seen at the entrance of the community center. It looked like she was diligently waiting for me today.

I locked my bike at the parking area and Isshiki noticed us heading towards her. Isshiki made a surprised face. Her gaze went back and forth between the three of us.

"Yui-senpai and Yukinoshita-senpai…? W-What's wrong?"

"Aah. I asked them for help."

After a very brief reply, I went inside to the community center. Isshiki nodded as she followed me. And following behind were Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

"Haa, I see… Ah, er, that would be a big help."

Isshiki showed a perky smile to Yuigahama and Yukinoshita. Yuigahama answered “yahallo” with a smile.

“Iroha-chan, looking forward to working with you!”

After Yuigahama said that, next to her who nodded in emulation was Yukinoshita.

“It looks like the situation isn’t very good.”

“Yes, that’s riiiight.”

As she said that, Isshiki handed me the convenience store bags. As I thought “she sure is quick to get used to this, huuuh?”, I obediently took them off her hands.

When I did, Yuigahama and Yukinoshita stopped their feet.

“……”

“……”

When I turned around to the disappearing sound of footsteps, both of them were fixated on those convenient store bags. Yuigahama was taken aback while Yukinoshita was looking at it with a cold gaze.

“What is it…?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

“Ah, uh huh. Right, right, it’s nothing.”

When I asked them, Yukinoshita abruptly removed her stare and Yuigahama slightly waved her hands in front of her chest as she laughed.

With those uncomfortable stares, we climbed up the stairs. Yuigahama looked around restlessly as if she was looking at something rare while Yukinoshita continued in disinterest.

And then we arrived at the Training Room where the meeting was being held.

“Thank you for your hard wooork.”

Isshiki went inside as she spoke in a light tone and we followed after her. When we did, attention was focused on Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

Isshiki hustled over to Tamanawa and was talking about something. She was probably telling him that she enlisted more helpers. Tamanawa nodded his head generously to that.

In the meantime, I dropped the convenience store bags with a thud in an open seat and quickly emptied them out. Yukinoshita and Yuigahama who watched and also the student council members helped.

There, Yuigahama who was focusing on the drinks let out an “ah” in a small voice. When I followed where she was looking ahead at, Orimoto was there. Orimoto was looking at the three of us with her eyes narrowing.

Oh yeah, I totally forgot Orimoto was here… When I looked at Orimoto again wondering what kind of reaction she was going to make, I was a little worried.

But Orimoto didn’t come over here and only gave a small greeting. When she did, Yuigahama bowed her head in a panic. Yukinoshita only stared back.

Well, they probably didn’t have a good impression of each other, huh… We weren’t even sure of the appropriate distance between ourselves, so thinking about how Orimoto’s was impossible. Quite honestly, we were at our limit.

“Anyway, why don’t we sit…?”

I said so to Yuigahama and Yukinoshita.

“Ah, okay.”

“I suppose.”

After the two nodded, I sat at my usual seat while Yuigahama sat to the side of me and Yukinoshita sat at the seat where Isshiki would usually be. She took the seat of honor as if it was natural, as you’d expect from Yukinoshita-san.

Isshiki came back and was confused.

“H-Huuuh? My seaaaat…”

As she said that in a small voice, she loitered around Yukinoshita. Noticing that, Yukinoshita began to stand up.

“Ah, I’m sorry. The seats must have been decided already.”

“Ah, no, no, that’s fine. I’ll be a lot more relaxed if I go over there.”

Isshiki said that, stopped Yukinoshita, and sat at the seat next to the vice president.

When everyone took their seats, Tamanawa went to his position that was like the moderator’s seat. He then opened his MacBook Air and looked at everyone who was present.

“Is everyone here? Let’s get started then.”

Tamanawa gave out the instruction. Everyone bowed while saying “look forward to working with you” and the conference began.

Today was the day we would finally decide on the things we need to do for the Christmas event… supposedly. I reminded Tamanawa beforehand, yet what followed was a day of rest. If we didn’t decide things now, things would be really bad.

The one who started the conference, of course, was the one at the moderator-like position, Tamanawa. When he called out to the Kaihin Sogo High student council, they began to distribute out printouts.

“After going through the BRAINSTORMING last time, I tried to do a little thinking. I made a RESUME so go ahead and read it.”

Apparently yesterday’s day off was for the purpose of making this.

The title of the resume read “Christmas Concert Event”. Written below were the contents of the plan. This was more like a proposal than a resume, but I paid it no attention and continued reading.

CONCERT EVENT exhibition that encompasses various GENRES of music with the CONCEPT “The Music Connecting Now”. A CONCERT that is comprised of CLASSICAL MUSIC, ROCK BAND, JAZZ, hymn, GOSPEL and during the intermission, a play with the theme on CHRISTMAS SOUND, and an arranged MUSICAL. A CHRISTMAS EVENT with ALL GENRES displaying the maximum synergy of music and plays.

…I did a quick skim through it. On my next read, I decided to go through it slowly with as much time as possible. But the written content didn't change.

Hey, hey, this wasn't even a universal proposal, this was just a chimera. But he most certainly did incorporate all the presented opinions.

The minutes had the orchestra, but it was written as classical instead so it was a problem with scale. Also, I wasn't too sure of the difference between hymns and gospel, but since he wrote both of them down, they must be different, huh… The others were written as they were and a simple look showed that it was the entire proposal.

But after incorporating every single opinion, the volume had swelled to an outrageous level. It wasn't so much an issue of not being possible as it didn't even seem possible.

"How is it?"

Tamanawa asked without talking to anyone in particular and everyone together made responses like "mmm, might be gooood", "sounds kind of fun", "sounds really exciting". The words were positive on the surface, but it's not like they were all universally in agreement.

The reason why there was a half-hearted agreement full of vagueness was because the brainstorms restricting the denying of another person's opinion. That or people weren't actually thinking seriously about this at all.

Still, at this rate, we'd never decide on anything. This was where we needed to point out the impossible factors that would bar this from happening realistically while maneuvering towards cutting down on the content.

"The scale's a little too big here. Also, are there people who can play music?"

"Yeah, that's why we will consider OUTSOURCING for that."

Tamanawa looked like he foresaw that question and answered without hesitation.

"For CLASSICAL MUSIC and JAZZ, there are the PRIVATE CONCERT deployment SERVICES. As for BAND, we have students at our school that can do it. If we can ask the theater club for the plays and MUSICAL, I think that should work out. Also, the GOSPEL… I suppose the church?"

The answer he gave was THE LEAVE IT TO PEOPLE[58]. Could you really call this our event…?

It’s not like outsourcing was a bad thing. As for the undoable portions and the things more specialized, it was often better to ask the appropriate people to handle the work than making poor attempts at them. If we could just leave it to others to get it done, then that wasn’t a big deal.

The real issue was whether that plan was realistic at all. When the day and date of the calendar came to mind, I spoke up.

“So, can we get the SCHEDULE of those deployment SERVICES?”

I didn’t think they’d be so reckless as to come the day before the event for us. Besides, their jobs were probably just as busy given the Christmas season.

“We’ll confirm that with them from here on.”

No, we need to do that ahead of time or else… No matter how you thought about it, it was far from rice cakes in the air[59] It was more like a failure illustration where the rice cake was personified and turned into a moe character “Mochimi-chan (big breasts)”.

Tamanawa added to his words as if judging something from my expression.

“I wanted to get a CONSENSUS from everybody first, you see. We’ll think up the GRAND DESIGN and then after that, I think we can start talking about where we should start OMITTING things for the first time.”

“Con… omi?”

Yuigahama was tilting her head. Well, I’ll explain the meaning of those words to her later because doing something about this conference takes priority.

I tried attacking from a different angle this time.

“Uh, so in the first place, is this really something high school students would do? I feel like the design of the plan already missed the point from the beginning.”

“That’s why it’s about ‘now’. We just need to show them what high school students are like now and overturn the IMPRINTED STEREOTYPE IMAGE of high school students.”

“Prin, stereo… image?”

Yuigahama was tilting her head again. Well, I'll explain the meaning of those words to her later… no, she should at least know what image meant.

Anyway, leaving the explanation to Yuigahama for later, the problem was Tamanawa. Quite frankly, I would've just settled for telling Tamanawa "look at reality", but saying that to someone who wasn't looking was completely pointless.

If there was something I could do, then it would be to get him to gradually give up by pointing out the realistic walls and hurdles that can't be overcome.

For that, I had something up my sleeve.

The other day, I prepared the balance sheet which I handed to Tamanawa. Finalized on there was the sundry expenses of the business concert. As I confirmed the numbers in great detail, I asked Tamanawa.

"So, say we order things externally, what are we going to do about the budget?"

According to the initial calculations, I recall that the market price for a single performer would run up to about 30,000 yen to 40,000 yen an hour. And if you factor in the people needed for classical music and jazz, then the amount would double. On top of that, if you increase the number of performers, then the cost would rise in proportion to that. Furthermore, gospel would cost quite a bit as well depending on their costs. If we were to follow all of what was on that proposal, then the current budget wasn't nearly enough.

But Tamanawa's answer wasn't any different from before.

"That's why this conference is for the sake of figuring out how to make it work."

When he said that, there wasn't anything else I could say.

It's not that the plan Tamanawa came up with was no good. Given that we had enough time and helping hands along with a budget, then it was fine. It was likely something that could be realized.

But those three factors were lacking in the current situation.

When I went quiet, there was no one else who had objections and the conference proceeded on to discussing how to make the event a reality and how to regulate the budget.

I imagined it'd be more relaxing for them to reduce the things they needed to do after they solidified the budget. But by the time they relaxed, they'd end up having not enough time and they would end up reducing things even more.

I could easily see that future play out and I let out a small sigh.

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After the conference ended, I was dead tired.

Ultimately, the things we were going to do weren't decided in today's conference either and it was postponed for later deliberation. Christmas was in a week and tomorrow was Saturday. Taking that day off was a rather painful loss of time.

Yukinoshita who was next to me was feeling disheartened as well. She placed her hand on her temple as if trying to suppress a headache and let out a sigh.

"That was more than I imagined… Have you been having that kind of conversation all this time?"

"…Yeah."

That's what I answered, but in reality, it was a lot worse. But "the present time" came to mind, it was actually some progress. When I looked back on things, an unpleasant smile spilled out on my face.

"The discussions weren't completely in line with each other at all, so just watching was irritating…"

"Yep… It felt like they weren't listening either."

When Yukinoshita said so in annoyance, Yuigahama nodded exhaustedly. But Tamanawa wasn't that kind of guy. Having watched him recently, I had come to understand that quite well.

"If he didn't listen at all, then we would've been better off… But because he forcefully tries to include things after only partially listening to things, things just stray off course even more."

“Aah, yes. That’s right…”

Isshiki agreed with a sigh.

In that heavy atmosphere, Yuigahama energized herself, hoping to turn it around, and faced me.

“So, what should we do?”

“…I don’t have a clue.”

I answered honestly. Frankly, there was a part of me that thought if everything was decided in the conference today, we could’ve jumped straight into our jobs and things would have worked out for the better. I had the expectations that we would’ve made some significant progress even if everything wasn’t completely decided. But now that the lid was taken off, this was what we got.

As I fell into thought about what to do, Yukinoshita stared at me and murmured.

“…So there’re things you don’t understand too.”

“What, are you being sarcastic? Of course there’d be a load of things I don’t understand.”

When I answered her by reflex like before, Yukinoshita stuttered with her words.

“I didn’t mean it like that, um…”

As Yukinoshita said that, she looked away from me and lightly bit her lips. She then dropped her gaze.

If this was in the past, then this should’ve been a meaningless exchange, but now it was rather awkward. I couldn’t seem to get a good grasp of this distance.

Unable to stand the mood, I scratched my head.

“…No, my bad. I want to do something about it, but I really don’t know what to do.”

“…I’m not criticizing you.”

Yukinoshita answered in a small voice while still facing down.

Yuigahama watched us timidly and broke in between us.

“W-Well, let’s just think about what we can do. Okay?”

“I suppose so.”

When Yuigahama said so, Yukinoshita lifted her head. She then lightly crossed her arms and softly placed her hand on her chin. Taking that posture, she slowly began to talk as if trying to confirm something after getting her thoughts in order.

“First, I think what we need to consider is dropping the scale of the event to something realistically possible…”

“Mmm. Even if you say so, what happened earlier is how things are so…”

Isshiki spoke, reflecting on the earlier conference. Given how things were going now, we couldn’t exactly pick the choice to reduce the scale of the event. That was probably something Yukinoshita saw and thought. Isshiki nodded back.

“Then that means we need to think about the extra additions to the budget. There’s the expense if we go in the direction of ordering a concert and even if we went with student bands, we’ll have to quickly secure time and a location for practice. As for the location, the music room would work, but if it’s too difficult, we’d have to rent a studio and that would factor in as an expense as well.”

When she said that, I realized. Aah, we needed to calculate the costs not only for the day of the event but the costs from the beginning too…

“So in that case, the estimate’s going to keep on increasing…”

Not to mention that the activities weren’t settled on so we couldn’t do any preliminary calculations either. We’re completely cornered here.

In the time I thought, Yukinoshita continued with her thoughts.

“As for what’s left, I suppose that’d be regarding how to secure the expenses. We can have the school deal with it or split the costs and after that, we could look for other sponsors from somewhere as well, but given how much time we have left, that may be difficult.”

“Yeah, we only have a week left after all.”

This week limitation was harsher than I thought. Even if the events were decided, the schedule didn't seem very doable.

In the end, we had to do something about the conference or we wouldn't see any progress otherwise.

"Realistically, they should be taking from the student council budget, but I don't think they'll allocate any according to this proposal and plan…"

Yukinoshita looked at the distributed resume created by Tamanawa and she was writing something with red pen as well as drawing lines. The resume which was touched up and had memos was suddenly plastered in red.

Yuigahama who was watching Yukinoshita doing that made a "howaah" sound as she looked with respect while Isshiki was watching in awe mixed with fear and withdrawal.

Well, I understand. In this short of a time, she organized the problematic points and proposed a detailed plan. That's Yukinoshita for you. It was likely that there wasn't a person at this school who could surpass Yukinoshita in regards to practical affairs like this.

Still, even with Yukinoshita here, she looked like she couldn't easily think of a solution. When she made a big "X" mark on her own memos, she let out a shallow sigh.

"However, I don't think that's the issue. There's something more fundamental…"

The person in question didn't seem too convinced, but for me, it was some progress. At the very least, we had something we could do right now.

"Anyway, let's try the things you came up with just now. For now, we'll talk about the money issue at school. We'll check if we can follow through with extra additions to it."

I said that, stood up, and Yukinoshita looked up at me with a slightly apprehensive expression. To see Yukinoshita lacking in confidence was quite rare that I was a little bewildered.

"…W-What's wrong?"

When I asked her, Yukinoshita abruptly turned away.

"No… I was just thinking that you had all this in mind already as well."

“No, I haven’t thought of anything that concrete.”

“I see… Then that’s fine.”

After saying that, Yukinoshita stood up as well.

In any case, first was money… It was a Christmas event, yet the first thing we were going to do was talk about money. There were no dreams, were there?

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We left the work of supervising the elementary students and updating the minutes to the other staff members and the four of us, three from the Service Club and Isshiki, returned to school. We needed to consult various things with the supervisor in charge of this collaborative event, Hiratsuka-sensei.

We entered the faculty office and went up to Hiratsuka-sensei. Upon making it to her, Hiratsuka-sensei was doing paperwork. That’s rare. Every time I visited her, this person was always eating something or watching anime or something.

“Sensei.”

When I called her, Hiratsuka-sensei lifted her head. She then looked at me and then at Yukinoshita and Yuigahama behind me and grinned.

“Hikigaya. Looks like you did your homework.”

“Homework?”

“We didn’t get any homework for modern Japanese.”

I would like it if you could stop with those expressions that could cause misunderstandings. When I spoke, Yuigahama sighed and rubbed her chest.

“I knew it, that was close. I was super surprised there.”

After Hiratsuka-sensei cheerfully laughed, she rotated her chair and adjusted her body towards us.

“In any case… what’s your business?”

“Yes… Isshiki-san, explain.”

“Eh!? Me!?”

Isshiki was completely unprepared up until Yukinoshita spoke and she was overly surprised.

“You’re the person in charge, aren’t you?”

With a sudden and slightly sharp stare directed at her, Isshiki groaned. W-Will she be okay…? This was late, but I was slightly worried about the relationship between these two. I thought about how maybe I should follow her up, but Isshiki took a step forward.

“Ummm, sensei, we have something we want to talk about…”

“Fumu, let’s hear it.”

After that, Isshiki gave an outline of the things up until now and talked about the current plan and the pending problem which was money. Yukinoshita and I would follow up on the portions that seemed vague or didn’t make any sense.

When we finished talking about most of the things, Hiratsuka-sensei fell back onto her seat and crossed her legs.

“So, first is the issue with the budget, huh…”

“Yes.”

When I replied, Hiratsuka-sensei nodded and then spoke.

“It looks like all of you don’t understand what Christmas is.”

“Hah?”

When I tilted my head wondering what she was talkin’ ‘bout, Hiratsuka-sensei hit her hand as if something came to mind.

“Why don’t I show you what I mean?”

After saying that, Hiratsuka-sensei grabbed her bag that was left on the side of her desk and rummaged through it. And then she pulled something out.

“It’s this!”

As she went “ta-dah!” by herself, Hiratsuka-sensei was waving around weird looking papers. The corners were folded and the papers were crumpled, but on closer inspection, they were apparently tickets of the sort.

“Those must be Destinyland tickets…”

Yukinoshita took a glance and revealed what it was. When she said that, I took an even closer look and on it was a small illustration of Pan-san.

Haaan, that does remind me, it was something like that. By the way, regarding the tickets you used for admission, they didn’t actually call it tickets. Destinyland was preached as the “The Land of Dreams” so the required ticket to enter was actually called a passport. They were rather meticulous about the details.

Yuigahama looked at the tickets raised high and let out her voice with a “ohhh”.

“What’s this about? There’re even four of them…”

When Yuigahama asked her, Hiratsuka-sensei instantly dropped the tickets and showed an unpleasant smirking smile.

“Aah, I kind of won it somehow at an afterparty of a wedding… Two times on top of that… I was told ‘you can go by yourself two times!’ twice…”

A tear was about to run down my cheeks from listening to her.

Wait! How could you say those kinds of things! If it’s Hiratsuka-sensei, it might just be so fun after the fourth time that you could go for the fifth time with your own money! If I was careless, I just might even go together with her on the sixth time. I mean really, someone please take her already or a lot of things would be bad.

When I looked at Hiratsuka-sensei with moist eyes, at some point, Hiratsuka-sensei was biting on the filter of the cigarette in her mouth.

“I’ll give these to you so get some studying done. The Christmas there is quite magnificent, so it should serve as a reference. Also… it’ll be a breather.”

She abruptly gave us a smile.

Well, there really wasn’t anything we could do right now. Since it’d serve as data and a breather, it’s not necessarily the case that it’d be completely pointless.

Still, if we’re talking about making use of this efficiently, then we might as well just sell it off for money… Or so I thought, but with Isshiki and Yuigahama making a commotion out of it, I couldn’t say it.

“Is this really ookay? Thank you very much!”

Isshiki was acting merrily, but I wasn’t too happy. I ended up spitting out the reason.

“Why at a time like this when it’s so damn packed…”

“That’s true, it might not be for me too…”

Yukinoshita nodded in agreement. Well, she didn’t seem like she’d like noisy places and crowds very much.

But there were people present that loved these festival oriented places. Yuigahama looked at us with a discontent face.

“Eeeeh? C’mon, let’s gooo.”

“You’re underestimating Destiny during winter, aren’t you? The blowing winds are super cold and it’s on the coastline.”

“To add, congestion and long lines are also an issue.”

Even after what I and Yukinoshita said, Yuigahama wouldn’t back down.

“Eeeh… Ah! But, but, Pan-san! They have “Pan-san’s Bamboo Fight[60]” there! You know, you even said you’d be okay going when we watched that DVD that last time!”

Yukinoshita reacted to the word “Pan-san”. She averted her face unnaturally like the grinding of rusty joints.

“…We can go whenever we want, so there really isn’t a need for us to go when it’s so crowded.”

Seeing Yukinoshita’s clumsy demeanor as an opening, Yuigahama pressed even further.

“C’mon, c’mon! Since it’s Christmas, then things will be all Christmas-like, right? It was like that in ‘Haunted Campus[61].”

“Not at all. This year’s Bamboo Fight will be in the normal way. Although, in the first place, it has never been adjusted towards Christmas before. Originally, it’s an attraction that’s regarded highly throughout the world.”

With a momentary flash of light in her eyes, Yukinoshita shut down Yuigahama’s attack. Yukinoshita’s words were a lot stricter than normal. Was it that? She couldn’t forgive offhand knowledge of Pan-san or something…?

Yuigahama stuttered in response to the spirited Yukinoshita, Isshiki next to her was withdrawing, and Hiratsuka-sensei was looking at her in interest. Although I was aware that Yukinoshita liked Pan-san, it was a little frightening. My voice slipped out.

“You sure are detailed…”

“This much is common knowledge.”

As she said that, Yukinoshita abruptly looked away. Her cheeks were becoming red as if she was embarrassed by her fervent speech. Which land was that common knowledge in? The Land of Dreams?

Yuigahama’s argument was completely destroyed by Yukinoshita, but even so, she didn’t give in and pulled on her sleeve.

“C’mooon, let’s gooo.”

“Definitely not.”

But it looked like introducing Pan-san had the opposite effect as Yukinoshita was obstinate. In turn, Yuigahama’s voice grew weak. In place of that, her hands that held Yukinoshita’s sleeves squeezed even harder.

“…I want to go together with Yukinon. I mean, recently we’ve been kind of like that and it’d be a waste too, so…”

When she said that, Yukinoshita quickly looked downwards. If it was like always, then Yukinoshita would’ve surrendered immediately to Yuigahama’s wishes, but she was acting flustered. It looked like she didn’t know what to do.

…As expected, things wouldn’t be that easy, huh?

The things you lost wouldn’t come back. It made me fully realize.

Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I as well were trying to gauge the distance.

Uhaa, these guys are so bothersooome. Well, the one who’s the most bothersome was me though! But, well, I was the one at fault for letting things turn out like this. In that case, I’ll at least take responsibility for that.

I scratched my head and I mobilized my knowledge regarding Destiny.

I couldn’t have you underestimating my knowledge of Chiba. When it came to things related to Chiba, I was the man who was on top of things. That applied to the Destinyland of Tokyo as well. If I was in a class of people from Chiba and was asked “Destinyland is Tokyo? Chiba?”, then I’d answer in a falsetto, “It’s the Land of Dreams. Haha!” By the way, the answer to that quiz was Chiba.

As I dug out the knowledge regarding Chiba and Destiny, a light bulb went off in my head.

“Goods.”

“Eh?”

Yukinoshita tilted her head in response to my words.

“Won’t they have Christmas versions of Pan-san there? So along those lines, I want to pick out a Christmas present for Komachi…”

There was the possibility that Yukinoshita would have normally completed the thought if it was just simple goods. But with the pretense of choosing a present and the season restriction, then it was somewhat different.

Yuigahama's face brightened up as if reading behind my intentions.

"Ah, that sounds good! We should all go and choose!"

Yuigahama grabbed Yukinoshita's hand with both of her hands. When she did, Yukinoshita gave up on resisting and relaxed her shoulders.

"…If that's how it is, well, there's not much we can do."

"Yeah!"

Yukinoshita looked at Yuigahama who was innocently happy with a smile, but she suddenly looked my way. She then asked with an earnest expression.

"So Komachi-san likes Pan-san?"

"Eh…? Aah, pretty much."

"I see. I didn't know that. In that case, choosing a present might be a little difficult…"

As she said that, Yukinoshita looked happy somehow. She might have been thinking that she was able to make a Pan-san comrade.

…Oh crap. I just made up a random reason on the spot, so it might be a good idea to tell Komachi to study up on Pan-san… W-Well, I'm sure Komachi will be able to dig up a conversation somehow! I believe in her! I'm sure Yukinoshita'll get super mad if Komachi gets a Pan-san quiz wrong, but if it's Komachi, she'll be okay! Onii-chan believes in you!

As I apologized to Komachi in my head, I could hear a low, groaning sound. When I looked, Isshiki had a duck mouth and looked at us with half opened eyes.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nooothing. I was just thinking abooout something."

Even after asking her, Isshiki abruptly looked away in disinterest. After that, she turned towards us again as if something came to mind.

"If anything, we're going to go with the four of us here?"

Now that she said it, that's true. There were four tickets and this would've been the most natural, but thinking about it some more, being the only guy was kind of rough… I looked at Hiratsuka-sensei wondering if we could avoid this and she made a broad smile.

"Well, since it'll be you four collecting data, then it seems right."

"No, but the thing is…"

When I was going to refute her, Yukinoshita crossed her arms and tilted her head.

"I have a year passport so one of the tickets won't be necessary."

A year passport? Are you serious? Just how into it are you…? Using the year passport, was this something like a Yukinon Biyori[62], non? Nenpassuuu[63].

Listening to the information regarding Yukinoshita's year pass, Isshiki quickly became energetic.

"Ah. Then, it'll be okay to call one more person, right? We can have a good balance that way toooo."

Isshiki smiled. Looking at that smile gave rise to an unpleasant premonition.

"Who do you plan on calling…?"

"It's. A. Secret."

Isshiki straightened her index finger and winked. With that annoying feeling to her, Isshiki didn't look like she was planning to answer the question which also caused me to realize who she was planning to call.

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It was the next day on Saturday and I was out since the morning.

I was out for the purpose of collecting data at Destinyland. It took about twenty minutes to get to Maihama Station by train which was where we would be meeting. It was only times like these where you could envy the people of Chiba. Also, the people who said "doesn't everyone at Chiba have their Coming-of-Age ceremonies at Destinyland?" and got envious

were typically the people from Urayasu[64] City. It was something that didn't concern a good majority of people living in Chiba.

While I had those thoughts in mind, the train would jolt and the landscape of Destinyland flew into view from outside the window.

I slipped out a small "…ooh" in response. Once you saw the White Wall Castle and the active volcano spewing out smoke attractions, it really did get you worked up even if you didn't have any prior interest to coming.

When I arrived at my destination, Maihama Station, I buoyantly hopped off the train. Even starting from the station, things like the departure chime was distorted to something Destiny related and the unique shape of the clock got you excited. Being shown all of this made you want to have fun at Destinyland at a moment's notice as soon as possible.

After leaving the ticket gate in an uplifting mood, the meeting place came immediately into view. I restlessly darted my eyes around wondering if everyone was here yet and a voice called out to me.

"Hikki, yahallo!"

Don't greet people like that here… I didn't have to confirm to know who it was. When I looked over, Yuigahama who was wearing a bobbing knit cap was waving her arms.

The tension must have gotten to her as she was carrying her beige coat in her arms. She was wearing a long knitted sweater with a long muffler around her collars and her hands were covered with mittens. It looked like she was properly fitted against the cold. But the mini skirt she was wearing with leggings underneath looked a little cold. But she might have taken that into account by wearing some sort of fluffy short boots of the sort to balance things out.

On the other hand, her standing neighbor, Yukinoshita, was firmly wearing a white coat with the collars popped. Her black gloves were dressed with fur and her tartan muffler looked warm. Yukinoshita was wearing a somewhat short pleated skirt, but was wearing black tights and long boots which didn't give the impression she was cold.

"Oh, you guys are early."

I walked up to the direction board they were standing in front of and greeted them.

“Arriving early five minutes before the designated time is standard conduct in society.”

Yukinoshita said nonchalantly. Yuigahama nodded in turn.

“Right, right, Yukinon was really early too. I thought I was here early myself, but Yukinon was the first one here.”

“…I just didn’t want to deal with the crowding train.”

Yukinoshita abruptly turned her face as she answered. When she did, her black hair that clearly contrasted against her white coat fluttered.

Yukinoshita was totally looking forward to Destinyland, wasn’t she? She’s so earnest…

Well, anyway, now the three of us were gathered.

“It’s just Isshiki left, huh?”

“Ah, if you’re talking about Iroha-chan, she’s over there.”

When I looked in the direction Yuigahama pointed, Isshiki had just left the station’s corner shop. And in addition to her from behind was someone else. It was Hayama Hayato.

…Well, that was expected. It’s Isshiki we’re talking about here. She probably did this and that like crying and adamantly clinging onto him to get him to come.

So it looked like it would be the five of us going around today.

Or so I thought when the person who appeared from behind Hayama was Miura. And after her was Tobe and Ebina-san.

I pressed against my eyes and I confirmed again the scenery before my eyes.

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita ←Makes sense.

Isshiki and Hayama ←Makes sense.

Miura, Tobe, Ebina-san ←Doesn’t make sense.

What’s this about…?

“Hey, why the heck are those guys here too…?”

I looked at the two looking for an explanation of this unexpected visual. When I did, Yukinoshita’s gaze inched to Yuigahama whose shoulders twitched in response.

“U-Ummm…”

Yuigahama squeezed and tapped her knit cap as her gaze wandered. It looked like that was her substituting for fidgeting with her bun hair.

“I-I mean, we had plans of going out anyway… B-Besides, I can’t just be Iroha-chan’s only friend! I’m stuck in between two rocks, you know!”

Yuigahama held her head. After that, Yukinoshita let out a short sigh.

I wanted to sigh too, but there was something else I wanted to say first. I glanced at Yuigahama who was groaning with her head in her hands.

“Now, don’t you go taking them along just because you can. You’ll take care of them right?”

“I-I really will, okay!”

Yuigahama shot her head up and said. Yukinoshita, who was watching her, spoke up.

“Then that should be fine. It’s not something we should be too concerned with.”

“Yukinon…”

Yuigahama seemed deeply moved somehow as she looked at Yukinoshita, but you know, just now, it was that, she was actually just declaring that it had nothing to do with her…

“I guess, but still…”

As I said that, there was something else that slightly bothered me. For now, this was probably something I had to mention.

“Yuigahama… don’t bother with trying to support them or anything.”

“Ah, okay… Right, I guess.”

After she said that, Yuigahama made a gloomy expression and faced downwards.

Right now, we weren't mature enough to be sticking our heads into other people's problems. That's why we would definitely end up being mistaken about a lot of things. I thought this was something I had to mention for sure.

Yuigahama was fiddling with her knit cap as if she was thinking about something. Her gaze was still facing downwards, but seeing how she was acting, I was aware that she understood it as well.

"…Well, not much we can do since they were called already. This works too since we can get them to help with collecting data and taking pictures."

In reality, I wasn't really expecting much, but I said so anyway. When I did, Yuigahama finally lifted her head.

"Yeah, right…"

Yuigahama looked like she was forcing her smile a little. Yukinoshita who was watching her combed through her hair and directed a slight smile at Yuigahama.

"If we're going to collect data, it'd be a good idea to decide on how we'll go around."

Yuigahama's face quickly sparkled.

"Ah, that's for sure! What should we ride first?"

"Well, maybe that…"

I looked in the direction of the train stationed at the platform of the Keiyo Line.

"The train!? You're totally ready to go home!?"

As we were talking, Isshiki and the others met up with us.

"Senpai, good mooorning to you."

"Yeah."

I returned a small greeting to Isshiki. Following right next to her was Hayama who spoke to me with a meek smile.

"…Hey."

“Yo…”

The words we exchanged were short. But our exchanged gazes compensated enough for that. I was trying to ascertain what was it that was hidden beneath that smile of his while it felt like Hayama was trying to see something inside of me.

When I was thinking those things, a sudden chill ran up my spine.

Huh!? Killing intent! No, rotten intent! Sensing that suspicious presence, I quickly turned around and Ebina-san was making a rotten smile. But when our eyes met, she quickly suppressed that rotten intent and cheerfully waved her hands.

“Hallo, hallo.”

“Huuuh? Hikio’s here too?”

From behind Ebina-san was Miura who showed her face, taking a peek our way. There, Tobe who was standing next to her exploded into laughter.

“Nah, nah, Yumiko, Hikio’s waay too hilarious. It’s Hikitani-kun anyway.”

They’re both wrong though…

“Since we’re all here now, shall we get going?”

After Isshiki looked around and said, we all began walking.

We stood in the line waiting at the entrance, exchanged our tickets into passes, and went inside from the entrance gate.

When we made it to a plaza of the sort, my voice slipped out.

The front that peeked from the gate had a gigantic illuminated Christmas tree. There were western style buildings lined up along the street with the White Wall Castle in the background.

It was as if we were in a movie. And there was a spectacle that I noticed that was used in movies with a Christmas motif. Suddenly, several movies came to mind. But for some reason, the first movie that popped in my head was “Home Alone 2”. Now that’s weird. I was pretty sure I watched a lot of other movies too…

For the time being, we still had the issue of collecting data, so I took out my digital camera from my blouson and noisily snapped pictures.

At the same time, the girl group was squealing as they started lining up behind the queue in front of the Christmas tree to take pictures. Yukinoshita who was next to Yuigahama looked distressed as she was stuck in the middle of them. It looked like she wasn't very used to that kind of mood. Of course, since Hayama was in the guy group, we had no choice but to line up as well.

And then, there was Tobe who was even louder than the girls. He lined up behind the girls, looked up at the tree, and screamed out.

"Uoooooh! The tree's amaaaazing! Totally getting pumped up hereee!"

Hayama looked at Tobe with a wry smile.

We waited for a little bit before it was finally our turn to take a picture. It looked like the staff of the park would handle taking the pictures for us, so I was fine for now.

After a group picture, various other pictures were taken: one with all the girls, one with just Hayama, Miura, and Isshiki, one with Yukinoshita and Yuigahama, and so forth. While watching them, number permutations and sequences came to mind.

Eventually, they finally finished taking pictures and when I started walking thinking we could finally get going, Yuigahama approached me with a cellphone in one hand.

"Hikki, thanks for waiting."

Next to her was Yukinoshita sighing as if just taking all those pictures was tiring. Was it that? Was her soul sucked away?

There, Yuigahama grabbed Yukinoshita's hand. She then pulled on my muffler. When she suddenly pulled on me, I stumbled forward. Yuigahama's face was close. And facing opposite from me was Yukinoshita's surprised face.

And then there was the sound of consecutive shutter snaps. One was from Yuigahama's cellphone and the other was from Ebina-san who was standing a little further away.

"Yuiii, I took the picture."

“Ah, thank youuu.”

When Yuigahama took the camera from Ebina-san, she pressed on the buttons to check the images.

“…Yuigahama-san.”

“Don’t go taking pictures like that…”

Both Yukinoshita’s and my voice overlapped. Yukinoshita’s eyebrow was raised and she looked a little upset. But in face of that, Yuigahama spoke with a nonchalant expression.

“I mean, if I asked you two, you both probably wouldn’t let me take the picture.”

“No, not really.”

If anything, letting me know would’ve been better. If I was mentally prepared at least, I could’ve gotten a better picture taken. My face was red in that picture we took just now so it was kind of bothersome.

“…Nevertheless, that’s not a good reason to be taking pictures however you please.”

Yukinoshita let out a sigh. When she did, Yuigahama felt despondent as if she thought she did something wrong after all.

“I-I’m sorry. I’ll ask next time.”

“…There won’t be a next time.”

Although she was wearing a pleasant smile on her expression, her voice was excessively cold. When she said that, Yukinoshita quickly walked ahead.

“I-I’m really sorry! Yukinon, wait for meee!”

Yuigahama ran after Yukinoshita in a panic. Yukinoshita’s pace gradually slowed down and eventually the both of them were walking side by side.

I was watching them from about two steps behind.

The feeling of distance that those two had always been trying to figure out was likely how it used to be.

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Space Universe Mountain[65]. That was the space mountain.

We were going to line up for the space mountain, one of the three biggest coaster attractions.

When we arrived in front of the dome of SpaMt (Space Universe Mountain in short), Yukinoshita crossed her arms and bended her head to the side.

“This wouldn’t be much of a reference since there isn’t a very Christmas feel to it, wouldn’t it…?”

It was very typical of the hardworking Yukinoshita to remember the reason why we were here; that is, we were here to collect data that would serve as a reference for the event.

But next to her was Yuigahama who didn’t look like she was thinking too hard and pointed to the side of the dome.

“Ah, but, look, that area over there is decorated with a wreath… So let’s line up!”

“That looks like something you can see everywhere else, isn’t it…?”

True, what Yuigahama was pointing at was the Christmas wreath that was common in Destinyland. It could be seen all over the place too. But it completely became the reason to line up for SpaMt.

No, well, Hiratsuka-sensei said this was a breather too, so it's not like that's a bad thing or anything…

Yuigahama looked at Yukinoshita with puppy dog eyes and Yukinoshita let out a sigh, eventually giving in.

"…Haa, just this time only."

After that, Isshiki who was lined up at the front turned around.

"Well, whatever attraction it is, I think we'll probably only be able to ride them once anyway, so why not?"

"Really?"

"Yes, for the time being, I thought it would be better to have a broader look on things."

Aah, so that's what she was aiming for. I was convinced after she said that.

So today's course was something Isshiki had cooked up.

After taking pictures, we would ride on the Pirate Kings of the Caribbean. From there, we would take the Black Thunder Mountain FASTPASS which would rapidly go around, arriving at the Tomorrow Never zone. And then after that, we would likely head to a different zone.

Often, many people from Chiba tend to think too much about how they would go about visiting the Destinyland attractions. They would take into consideration of the most efficient routes suited to their own preferences in order to comply with their goals. Not only might this be due to experience, but also due to their geographically advantageous mindset that Chiba individuals had.

Since Yukinoshita gave in, we began lining up for SpaMt.

At the front of the line was Hayama and the others while at the farthest back was Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. The seating arrangement of SpaMt was two per seat so the line naturally became double file.

"Yukinon, let's ride together, okay?"

"Y-Yes… Will this really be of any use at all?"

It looked like both Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were ready to ride together.

Umu, I wasn't sure if they were completely like they were before, but their relationship seemed very tender.

At the same time, the front was an illustration of hell.

The line was supposed to be double file, yet there was a spot where it was clearly triple file.

It was Hayama and to his left and right were Miura and Isshiki. Both Miura and Isshiki would assertively talk to Hayama while shooting each other restraining looks.

Since I was in the back, I couldn't see Hayama's expression, but I got the feeling he was making a troubled smile.

Miura and Hayama's relationship didn't seem so awkward though, possibly a result of the Destinyland effect.

Though, behind them was a guy groaning.

"What am I gonna do, what am I gonna do!?"

Tobe was grumbling about something to himself. But he eventually looked determined and plunged himself towards Hayama.

"Haayaato-kun! Let's get on together!"

When he energetically ran in between the three, Miura and Isshiki gave Tobe a sharp look.

"Tobe, you know…"

"Tobe-senpai, you're in the way♪."

Miura's eyebrows closed in together with an angry look and Isshiki had a grinning smile while saying something cruel.

Uwaah, that area looks like a frozen wasteland… Just watching made it cold over here…

Still, today's Tobe wasn't backing off. He slapped his hands together and paid his respects to the two.

“Eh, ya knoow, c’mon, like that’s a bit out there for me? Seriously, SpaMt is super scary, really. Er, seriously, I’m beggin’ ya here!”

“”Ha?””

I really wanted to just say “Nice Coupling”[66] to them, what with that amazing unison there. And as you’d expect, Tobe whined even more. But a saving hand was extended to him.

“That’s fine with me, Tobe. Let’s ride it together.”

“Hayato-kuuun…”

It felt like I could hear the lines “oooh, my kindred spirit” as Tobe hugged Hayama. Miura looked at that with eyes saying “Hayato, you’re so nice…”

If you were just watching here, then you’d see Hayama as a nice guy, but considering the entire situation from above, that actually wasn’t the case. The one who was helped was Hayama and in a different meaning, Miura and Isshiki as well.

Tobe, what a nice guy… If this was a movie version, he’d be an even nicer guy.

As I looked at them in admiration, Ebina-san slid towards the back before Tobe had threw himself up there with his influence. She then abruptly showed a smile.

“Tobecchi, he sure has it rough.”

Although she wasn’t saying it like it was somebody else’s problem, those words were clearly from someone who had taken a step away from that area. Was Ebina-san still the same as she was from that field trip? Did she still have that same unchanging sentiment back during that moment?

I ended up wanting to check that with her and slipped out a question.

“I guess… Why don’t you go help him out?”

Ebina-san worried for a little bit and dropped her gaze to her feet.

“Mmm…”

But she only did that for a little bit and when she quickly lifted her head, her glasses nicely gleamed.

“Fufufu, this is where Hikitani-kun should go help out Tobecchi, right? Aah, if I start now, I might be able to make a paper in time for the Winter Comiket!”

“Please stop...”

“It’s because Hikitani-kun said something weird.”

The words she replied with were cold. Even after looking at Ebina-san’s face, I couldn’t see the depths of the shine in her eyes behind the lenses.

“Hikitani-kun, don’t you have other things to worry about other than us?”

“……”

There wasn’t a need to confirm what she was indicating. That’s why I stood there without answering. After that, Ebina-san tried her hand at humor despite being aware of that.

“Like Hayato-kun for example!”

“Nope, nope.”

I instantly refused and Ebina-san happily laughed. She then withdrew her smile and quietly hid her voice.

“…About that time, sorry.”

“Ha?”

Just when I thought what she was blurting out and asked her back, Ebina-san spoke in an extremely small voice so she couldn’t be heard from behind.

“Was it perhaps because of what happened back then that things seem kind of strained?”

“…It has nothing to do with that.”

That field trip was just one of the many triggers since I thought we would’ve been in this situation eventually. It wasn’t Ebina-san’s responsibility as it was ultimately my decision.

“Glad to hear that then.”

“It doesn’t seem strained on your end, huh?”

“…Uh huh, thanks to you.”

Ebina-san readjusted her glasses with her finger. I didn’t see it slip off, but it looked like she was adjusting something.

On that note, we didn’t talk about anything in particular and quietly stood in line.

It’s not always the case that the things said were the truth.

That was something I came to know from her request.

And even if you thought you knew, there were still times you would end up overlooking something. I learned that just now as well.

Surely enough, Ebina Hina had probably said another lie.

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When we got off SpaMt, I was unsteady on my feet. I didn’t feel anything when we were getting spun at a high speed, but I was assaulted by the feeling of gravity setting in. Was this what they called the Reconguista in G[67]?

Of course, that feeling didn’t apply to only me as the others were in the same boat although on different varying levels. And amongst them was Isshiki who was going “fueee…” in a pathetic voice as she staggered.

Someone was holding onto Isshiki’s hand.

“T-Thank you very much…”

Isshiki smiled and gave her gratitude and the other person let out an annoyed sigh.

“Like seriously, are you okay?”

“Ah, it was Miura-senpai, huh…?”

Isshiki’s smile disappeared instantly. After that, Miura gave her a plastic bottle in a panic.

“Eh, your face is totally blue, isn’t it? Want water?”

“I’ll be, okay, but… Thank you very much…”

Isshiki gave her thanks in stutters with a shocked look and took the bottle.

…Miura’s a good person.

Though, Isshiki was probably aiming for Hayama to nurse her back. But in the face of Miura’s motherly instincts, I guess that didn’t work…

As Miura took care of the staggering Isshiki, we started to move again.

The SpaMt area had a lot of popular attractions so the crowd was outrageous. And in that crowd was one more person who was staggering as she walked. Yuigahama didn’t overlook this and spoke to her.

“Yukinon, are you okay?”

“I’m fine… It’s just the crowds of people are getting to me…”

Was that really being “fine”…? Well, I could understand how she was feeling. I was getting sick and tired of this crowd myself.

Although I was worried whether she’d be okay later, Yukinoshita made a complete recovery by the time we got to the next destination.

Oh, I get it now! The next attraction was “Pan-san’s Bamboo Fight”!

This Bamboo Fight as duly noted by Yukinoshita had nothing to do with Christmas, literally saying “what the heck’s this Christmas mood in Destinyland, who cares about that, Chinese New Year is more important!” As such, this event wouldn’t prove to be much of a reference, but Yukinoshita didn’t voice a single complaint and lined up. No, no, that’s fine too…

The line was rather long, but upon using my technique, “Space out in earnest” from my special skills, the waiting time didn’t bother me.

Eventually, we made it into the building and I let out a sigh to the warmth.

“Okay, so how should we ride this?”

When Yuigahama said, Isshiki and Miura were readying their forks. Even though Isshiki was indebted to her earlier, it looked like she wasn't in the mood to give in just yet. Tobe also readied himself as well.

But worrying about Tobe was pointless.

Judging from at the gourd shaped ride moving at the front, it looked like it was a three to four person ride.

So that meant the Hayama's group of three were decided. As I was thinking about the remaining groups, it was almost our turn.

Yukinoshita called to Yuigahama.

"Shall we get going?"

"Okay."

After she answered, Yuigahama lined up next to Yukinoshita.

Well, that's right. Yukinoshita's been with Yuigahama the entire day so far. As such, it was natural for those two to ride together in this Bamboo Hunt[68].

So that meant I'd be riding with Tobe and Ebina-san, huh…? No way, that sounds super awkward. Although it was a lie, it was still a group consisting of someone who confessed and his supposed love rival. As I was thinking "would it be okay if I went on the ride alone? Please tell me, Yukipedia-san.", Yukinoshita was gallantly about to board the ride.

Following her was Yuigahama. But she then turned around towards me, shuffled her way to me, and grabbed my sleeve. She then pulled me towards the ride while she was facing downwards.

"Hi-Hikki, hurry up."

"Eh, wai, I'm going on with Tobe and…"

I wasn't the least interested in riding with Tobe, but that slipped out of my mouth.

"That's fine. There're people waiting behind us too."

Once she said that, I had no choice but to get on board. The door to the ride closed and the lady in charge waved her hands and watched us off as she said “Welcome to the Bamboo Fight world.”

The ride moved inwards towards the darkness and as it progressed, red and orange lights suddenly burst out. It might have been because of the light source that Yuigahama’s side profile as she looked downwards was dyed in red. She then looked at me with upturned eyes. Thanks to that, even I got a little embarrassed.

The order of seats was Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and me, but I tried as much as I could to move to the edge and Yuigahama was trying to create some distance as well. Though because of that, the remaining space caused Yukinoshita to be pressured.

“…Space.”

Yukinoshita let out that single word.

“Ah, sorry.”

Yuigahama then moved over to my side. I tried to make up for how much she moved in my direction by moving towards the edge. But that’s why our distance didn’t change all that much.

The ride still continued in the meantime and we arrived before a big screen.

On the screen was Pan-san running left and right and then, there was an overflow of plushy Pan-sans filling the interior of the attraction.

The ride we were on responded to the movements of all of the Pan-sans and it moved inwards to the attraction.

“Oooh, this is pretty amazing…”

“Quiet.”

When I voiced my honest impression, Yukinoshita’s voice flew out.

No whispering allowed… Just how into this were you…?

Still, as I sat there in silence, the occasional bumping of our elbows and arms because of the violent jolts of the ride really bothered me. It really was bad for my heart.

Halfway through, nothing in the attraction found its way into my head as I was simply trying to free myself from mundane thoughts.

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After getting off of “Pan-san’s Bamboo Fight”, there was a Pan-san shop in the immediate area.

Hayama and the others who got off first were waiting at the entrance of it. Following right after us was Ebina-san and Tobe.

“Maaan, Pan-san really is the bomb!”

Tobe had an extremely blissful smile probably because he was able to ride together with Ebina-san. But there was one more person with a radiant face.

It was Yukinoshita.

She let out a deep “mfuu” sigh in satisfaction. She most certainly did get her fill of it, after all…

“Hey, Hikki. There’s a Pan-san shop over there, what should we do?”

Yuigahama who was half a step behind poked my back and asked. I directed my gaze at the Pan-san shop without turning around.

“Let’s see…”

Well, I did say all those things to Yukinoshita so I needed to look for Komachi’s present here.

“Sorry, I’m going to do a little shopping here.”

I said to Hayama and the others and Isshiki burst into giggles.

“Eh, senpai, you’re going to buy something from here?”

“…A present for my little sister.”

Why are you making such an amused face, Irohasu…? You didn’t need to go through the trouble of pointing it out. I already knew that the Pan-san goods didn’t fit me, jeez.

“I see. Then, what should we do?”

Hayama asked the others. When he did, Miura abruptly looked away from the Pan-san shop to the exit.

“I’ll paaass.”

Ebina-san let out a puzzled sound and questioned her.

“Are you sure, Yumiko?”

“I mean, isn’t Pan-san’s eyes like not cute at all? I totally want to see Sassy Cat Marie-chan [69] instead.”

Sassy Cat Marie was one of the many Destiny characters popular with the girls. She was something like a pink cat.

For her to choose a more girlish character instead of being interested in Pan-san, Miss Totally was quite sly! I guess she really did like the color pink, huh? I, too, like the color pink as well.

As I stood there in admiration, next to me was an individual emitting an incredible cold aura. It goes without saying that it was Yukinoshita. Her frozen over eyes were fixed on Miura. Not good, Yukinoshita’s super mad. At this rate, the only thing I could see this turning into was Miss Totally breaking into tears from having her arguments completely refuted in about thirty minutes.

“Things won’t be good at this rate…” As I thought that, Isshiki took a step into the Pan-san shop and grabbed the closest stuffed toy.

“Reaaally? Something like this is cute too. Right, Hayama-senpai?”

The one Isshiki asked was Hayama, but for some reason, Yukinoshita was nodding with her eyes closed. Well, what she was referring to was her own cute appeal and not Pan-san’s though.

But thanks to Isshiki, Yukinoshita looked gratified. Her cold aura began to retract itself.

“Anywho, if we’re not buyin’ anythin’, then we better line up for lunch. Looks like it’d be totally packed.”

Tobe snapped his fingers and spoke. Seeing him do that was annoying, but what he said was a fascinating proposal. What a good guy. He’s still annoying though.

Still, the idea of them lining up for us while we were shopping made me a little reluctant. That’s why I decided to check with him.

“…You okay with that?”

“Aah, no problem. Hikitani-kun, ya got your hands full right? Like choosing a present for your sister? Take your time.”

“Sorry about that.”

I lightly bowed my head and Tobe waved his hands saying not to worry about it.

“No problem, no problem. Hayato-kuun, let’s goo!”

“Yeah.”

When Hayama answered, Tobe accompanied him outside. If Hayama was leaving, then so would Miura and Isshiki. And Ebina-san who didn’t seem particularly interested in Pan-san followed after them with an “okay, see you ahead”.

Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I were the three remaining at the Pan-san shop.

Yukinoshita looked at me and Yuigahama as she carefully folded her muffler she took off.

“Well then, shall we choose a present for Komachi-san?”

“Yeah. That’ll help. Let me know if you have anything you recommend.”

“Yes. I’ll see what I can find.”

When she said that, Yukinoshita familiarly went inside the Pan-san shop and began scouring for things. She was extremely dependable, but she didn’t need to put so much effort into it… Well, I was the one who asked so I didn’t have the right to complain.

But leaving the entire thing to just Yukinoshita made me a little apprehensive. I'll try looking for something too… First, I reached out to the closest shelf. Yuigahama stood next to me as I was staring at the Pan-san in Santa clothes.

"I'll help pick one out too."

"Sorry. Honestly, I'm not sure about choosing something from my own interests."

"If it's Komachi-chan, I think she'd be happy anyway."

"No, we're quite similar. She's the type to clearly say what she likes or doesn't like."

"I see. Then we better try our best and pick the right one."

After that, Yuigahama eyed several things like stuffed toys, blankets, puppet keychains and other things. Still, weren't there just too many Pan-san merchandise here…? There were already quite a variety of plush toys as it was.

"Komachi-chan's present, huh? Did you ever ask her what would be good?"

Yuigahama asked as she looked at the puppet Pan-san as if it was something rare.

"I did hear her out, but they were things like book gift certificates or gift cards…"

"Ah, aaah… Ahaha…"

Yuigahama had a shocked and troubled smile. This was the reaction from hearing about a money certificate. I guess I couldn't really mention the third wish of a house appliance after all…

Yuigahama grabbed a puppet she seemed to have caught an interest in and played with it. With that puppet, she would go "ey!" while grabbing my hands and obstructing me. Eeey, that's super annoying, super cute, and embarrassing to the point it was getting in the way. It really was embarrassing so I would like for you to stop.

When I brushed off the puppet, it was then thrust in front of my face and moved weirdly.

Once my eyes met with the eyes of the puppet Pan-san's, Yuigahama started to talk in a strange voice.

"…What does Hikki-kun want for Christmas, I wonder?"

She was trying to imitate Pan-san it seemed. She didn't sound anywhere close at all, seriously. Besides, what's Hikki-kun about? It was too amusing that I tried to answer with a half-smile.

"No, I-"

But just when I was about to talk, the events from the other day flashed in my head. Because of that, I choked on my words.

Yuigahama tilted her head thinking the sudden born silence was odd and looked up at me. When our eyes met, she realized something and raised a small voice.

"…Ah."

Yuigahama's face then instantly turned red.

She probably remembered the same thing. The words that I said that time.

I pressed against my cheeks and mouth with my right hand in embarrassment and looked away.

"I don't really…"

"I-I see…"

Yuigahama pulled back the puppet and quickly went to put it back in its original place.

Both of us looked at the merchandise in silence for a moment. As we did that, increasing amounts of people filled the Pan-san shop. It looked like it was a party of tourists. Seeing that, Yuigahama opened her mouth.

"It really is packed, huh?"

"Well, it's that time of the season. I'm surprised they felt like coming given the season. I wouldn't even if I had the chance…"

I looked over the shop that started to get crowded and I let out a sigh. As expected, it's because it was Christmas that every nook and crevice in the park was packed with people and even as you walked and walked to your destination, it was still littered with people. It was tiring.

“But, I do want to… come again.”

When I turned to the pausing voice, Yuigahama was caressing a big plushy.

“You can go whenever you want, can’t you? It’s close too.”

“That’s not, the point though…”

Yuigahama shot glances at me as if hinting at something as she said that. It pricked my chest and that irresponsible promise I made at the Culture Festival came to mind. Since the Athletic Festival, field trip, and student council election followed right after, that promise was still on the backburner.

Just how much of that feeling of distance that intended to take a single step over the line changed?

I extended my hand out to the big stuffed toy that Yuigahama had been petting for a while now and spoke as I looked at its face.

“…Well, Destinyland during this season is kind of rough, but I wonder how the nearby new one is, huh?”

“Eh?”

Yuigahama lifted her head and looked at me.

“Destinyland’s fine too as long it’s not crowded.”

As I thought to myself there was probably a better way to say it, I couldn’t find the right words.

Even so, Yuigahama answered in a small voice.

“…Over there, might be, a bit more, quiet maybe.”

“…I see.”

“Uh huh…”

Yuigahama looked downwards and nodded.

After I looked at her with a side glance, I hit the head of the plushy and went to a different shelf.

“…Well, eventually.”

“Yeah, eventually.”

Her voice returned to being bright again and she followed behind me.

“Well, what to choose, huh?”

I said in a demotivated voice. So with this, the conversation was over. I’ll fulfill the promise during the continuation of this. After that, Yuigahama called to me in an energetic voice as if answering to that.

“Ah, Hikki, how does this look?”

When I turned around, Yuigahama was wearing a headband with dog ears. It looked like merchandise of a recurring dog character that appears in Pan-san with its ears flopping over.

She looked at herself in the mirror going “waah” as if not caring about my opinion even though she asked for it.

“Ah, this one might fit Yukinon. Yukinooon.”

When Yuigahama called her, Yukinoshita was full of Pan-san merchandise in both hands.

“Which one might Komachi-san like, I wonder?”

Yukinoshita looked anxiously at the Pan-san goods in her hands. U-Um… You didn’t have to be that serious about it, okay?

Yuigahama who had the headband in both hands hidden behind her back stood in front of the worrying Yukinoshita.

“Hey, Yukinon.”

“What is it?”

In the moment she tilted her head, Yuigahama placed the headband onto Yukinoshita's head. The headband with cat ears that Yukinoshita wore was apparently from another recurring character in Pan-san. She had a blank look.

And Yuigahama then stood next to Yukinoshita without a moment's delay.

"Hikki, take a picture, a picture!"

"Eh, aah."

We don't have to buy them right…? Well, I guess it's something like trying on clothes. As I thought that, I readied the camera and took the picture.

Chapter 8: And then, Yukinoshita Yukino is

Chilly winds began to blow in Destinyland positioned in a part of the coastline once it was night time.

The fireworks following the parade would be canceled should the winds grow too strong, but given that there hadn't been anything announced, the fireworks would probably be held as scheduled.

After we shopped at the Pan-san shop, we visited numerous other attractions, taking pictures for reference. I was really doubtful regarding the usefulness of these pictures, but, well, ultimately, there wasn't much we could do in the past two days we had off. With that in mind, it wasn't exactly a totally fruitless endeavor even if the pictures only served to be reference material at best.

The fatigue accumulated with the constant walking and standing around. Although we took breaks here and there, the crowd didn't allow us to move leisurely as we wanted and every single one of us was quite tired.

At the moment, we were moving around seeing if we could ride on one more attraction before the start of the parade, but compared to the afternoon, everyone's pace was slower.

I naturally found myself floating behind the group out of habit whenever they would act or move as a whole. But thanks to that, I could examine the exhausted expressions of the group that exchanged fewer and fewer words.

In particular, Isshiki talking to Tobe diagonally in front of me left an impression on me.

"…Tobe-senpai, do you have a second?"

"Ooh, what's up, Irohasu?"

Isshiki looked like she was paying careful attention to not stand out and talked to Tobe in a low voice, but Tobe's answering voice was loud. Isshiki pulled Tobe's sleeve as if finding that problematic and whispered something into his ear.

"…Eh, serious?"

Tobe spoke with a surprised, or more like, a slightly unpleasant expression. Tobe made a complicated face, but after a quick glance of his surroundings, it looked like he lowered his

voice and said something. But to see the normally loud Tobe to whisper secretly like that was oddly unnatural.

Isshiki lightly bowed to Tobe when their conversation finished in a few words and she quickly headed to the front where Hayama and Miura were. It looked like she asked Tobe for something. Tobe was incessantly pulling the back of his hair as if he was stumped.

Isshiki who headed to the front stood next to Hayama who also had Miura at his side as well. It looked like we were going to continue straight ahead until we leave the plaza.

Hayama chatted with Isshiki who came up to talk to him nonchalantly without showing any signs of exhaustion, but Miura was looking a little tired as she walked sluggishly.

Following behind them were Yuigahama and Ebina-san who were yapping to each other, still looking energetic.

And then there was me. I was walking behind them, currently set to slightly tired mode.

Similarly positioned to me was Yukinoshita whose walking was also a little slow. Yukinoshita who was never confident in her stamina, but here she was in this crowd. She looked the most tired of us all.

Her slender legs were heavily moving along even now. She suddenly let out a deep breath.

“You okay?”

“Yes.”

Although I called out to her, Yukinoshita’s answer was brief. As for why she didn’t look my way, I wasn’t sure if that because she was exhausted or that the distance between us was still somewhat strained.

“Ah, crap.”

I heard Yuigahama’s voice as she was walking ahead and looked in her direction.

When I did, the street that extended to the plaza that we were going to leave was just about to be barred away with ropes for the parade.

Yuigahama and Ebina-san dashed off noisily ahead and barely made it past the rope that was set in place. Both me and Yukinoshita who were slightly further behind them were completely late in our start.

When the both of us were separated from Yuigahama and the others by a single street, Yuigahama turned around and waved her arms, noticing that we were behind her and called out. I lightly raised my hand in response and answered.

“Go on ahead. We’ll be right behind you.”

“Gooot it!”

Yuigahama shook her arms and went after Hayama and the others ahead. I saw her off and turned to Yukinoshita.

“…Okay, we should get going.”

“I suppose so.”

We knew where they going to be anyway. Taking a detour from this plaza was out of the way, but that wasn’t something bad. But due to the street being blockaded off for the parade, the path on our side was seeing an increase in the density of people.

On top of that, it was night time and the lights of the attractions were all brilliantly lighting up. There were numerous people who stopped and prepared to take pictures as if they were paying their offerings. Because of that, we couldn’t proceed as we had wanted to.

It took a considerable amount of time to reach Spride Mountain, the next ride we planned to ride. I took a look at the entrance, but Yuigahama and the others were nowhere to be seen.

Yukinoshita tried looking around as well and spoke when she noticed that they didn’t seem to be in the area.

“Shall we call them?”

“I guess so…”

I took out my cellphone and called the one number I knew from their group. It took three rings for the other side to finally answer.

“Yeees?”

Accompanying Yuigahama’s voice were the noisy voices of others. They likely belonged to Hayama and the others.

“Where are you? We’re both here.”

“Ah, sorry, we already went inside.”

“O-Okay…”

I thought they would wait for us, but clearly not… When I was hit by the light shock, Yuigahama spoke in a panic noticing that from my voice.

“It’s okay, it’s okay! If you take the FASTPASS line, we’ll meet up right away. It’s not very crowded right now too, so you’ll get through the line super quick. That’s why we ended up talking about how it’d be okay for us to go on ahead and stuff…”

I glanced at the waiting line while listening to her.

As she said, the line was shorter than usual. The display with the wait times indicated about thirty minutes. Considering how fast the line was moving now, it was likely going to be much shorter. Also, if we took the FASTPASS line as suggested by Yuigahama, we should easily be able to meet up. Sometimes, there were people who would use it to go to the restroom while waiting in line, so there shouldn’t be much of a problem using it to meet up with others.

“Got it.”

“Okay, see you later.”

I hung up and looked at Yukinoshita’s face.

“It looks like we’ll meet up inside.”

When I spoke, Yukinoshita nodded her head back and we headed towards the line.

You couldn’t use the FASTPASS line at the beginning. The time in which you could use the FASTPASS was determined and it was also monitored securely. That’s why we lined up in the

normal waiting line. But we could smoothly continue on even in this line. It was likely the customers were migrating towards the parade.

“In any case, we’ll go with this until the line stops moving.”

We’d go as far as we could in this line. From there, if we took the FASTPASS line like switching over traffic lanes, then we should be able to find Yuigahama and the others immediately.

As we stayed in line, it progressed further and we had already covered a lot of ground.

And then, there was a group of seemingly high school students from some high school wearing gakuran[70] uniforms at the front in a dispute. When it was the opening of the parade and fireworks, the young people waiting for their chance would dash with all their might so they could ride the attractions over and over again. It looked like that their dashing was the main cause of the dispute. They were quarreling about who was first and who had cut them and the sort.

The staff immediately flew in and they were all asked to leave. The line continued solemnly with that warning in place.

Yukinoshita looked at the faces of the people at front and at the back.

“It doesn’t seem like we can go ahead by saying we have friends waiting for us…”

“Right. I’ll call one more time…”

I took out my phone and pressed the redial. But no matter how many rings went by, there was no answer.

“And she’s not picking up…”

Yuigahama’s number was the only one I really knew… I had given my number to Hayama before, but I never got to know his.

“Do you know any of the other guys’ contact info?”

I figured I’d ask Yukinoshita just in case, but she shook her head. Of course… I tried calling several more times as we reluctantly stayed in line and with the line moving forward, we

could already see the lower level. Once we went down that curb, we would be at the boarding area.

“Since we’re this far in, it’d be faster to just get on the ride instead of going back. They might be waiting at the exit too.”

“…I-I suppose so.”

Yukinoshita answered with a voice that was somehow not calm. When I took a glance at her, she was quietly facing downwards.

“…What’s wrong?”

“…”

Yukinoshita didn’t answer even after I asked her.

…Wait. Now just wait a second. Waaait, waaait. I get the feeling I’ve come across this kind of scene several times before… I grew a little worried so I asked Yukinoshita after a cough.

“Do you mind if I check something with you?”

“What could that be?”

Yukinoshita looked at me with a tense expression. I stared back at her eyes as well and I asked her slowly and carefully as to avoid missing her reaction.

“Could it be that you’re not good with this?”

It was silent for just a moment as we glared at each other expressionlessly. And there, Yukinoshita’s gaze smoothly slid to the side.

“…It’s not that I’m not very good at this.”

Yeah, I remember hearing that same phrase somewhere before… It was the same phrase she used when I told her she wasn’t good with dogs.

Aah, I knew it was totally something like that. It’s totally the usual Yukinoshita pattern that I knew. Thinking back on it, I do recall her staggering on her feet after getting off SpaMt. It wasn’t an issue with the crowding. It was simply just an issue with her not being good with coasters.

“You really need to say that ahead of time… Let’s go back.”

“I’m fine.”

“Well, you’re not really good with this though, right?”

When I told her, Yukinoshita grew sullen and frowned. She then spoke with a strong tone.

“I said I was fine, didn’t I?”

“Don’t be an idiot. It’s not something you need to force yourself with, let alone something to be stubborn about.”

That’s why my words ended up sounding harsher than normal.

After that, Yukinoshita’s shoulders shook and she dropped her gaze.

“…That’s not it. I’m fine, really.”

It felt like the voice she spoke with sounded more immature than usual. No, it was because she normally appeared mature, but the fact of the matter was that she was a girl who was the same age as me.

Yukinoshita continued her crude words clumsily.

“I wasn’t too confident, but when Yuigahama-san was with me, I was fine… That’s why, probably, I’ll be fine.”

What Yukinoshita was saying wasn’t really a reason that was straight to the point and well-grounded. Compared to how she would speak logically normally, she wasn’t really saying anything that was relevant. However, it’s because of this irrationality that I thought it was close to how she really felt. If so, then that's something I had to respect.

“Well, if you say so…”

Even after saying that, Yukinoshita didn’t lift her head. Despite being no good at it, she totally didn’t look like she’d be fine riding this… I scratched my head looking for the words I needed to say.

“Well, it’s basically that. You should just take it easy and ride it. It’s not like it’s something we’ll die from or anything.”

“I-I suppose you’re right.”

With her face still downwards, Yukinoshita spoke and glanced upwards at me with upturned eyes.

“…We really won’t die, right?”

Just how anxious were you…?

“Don’t worry. At least not from what I’ve heard.”

As I said that, the line continued forward and Yukinoshita trudged along. When we made it down the last curve, we arrived at the boarding area.

It was then our turn to get on the ride.

First, I boarded the ride first. And next was Yukinoshita who clenched her fist and got on. She was using so much strength that her arms were slightly shaking.

Even when the ride slowly started off, Yukinoshita didn’t relax her posture.

Eventually, a fancy song played as this attraction’s tale of Br’er Weasal and Br’er Ferret[71] unfolded. The weasel robot would make mechanically clattering noises as it blinked. But Yukinoshita looked like she didn’t have the luxury of paying attention as her gaze was focused on looking forward.

“Um… We’re not going to drop yet, so you’ll be fine even if you don’t hold the bar.”

“Y-Yes. I, guess so…”

Yukinoshita finally let go of the bar. And she then let out an exhausted sigh.

“You’re really not good at this, huh…?”

While I did ask her, I didn’t think she was this bad at it. When I told her, Yukinoshita had a self-deprecating smile.

“Yes. Long ago, there was, something with nee-san…”

“Hm? Aah, your sister, huh?”

That person again…

Yukinoshita Haruno. She was Yukinoshita's older sister who was a perfect, super human demon that surpassed her little sister. Then again, you know, Yukinoshita-san, you didn't seem so absolutely perfect recently…

It looked like Yukinoshita was able to calm down after talking as she looked at the attraction. And there, the frogs would frolic around with spurts of water. I mean, you're still by far above the rest in excellence though.

Yukinoshita slowly spoke as if she was matching with the slow progression of the ride.

"It was something back when I was younger. Every time we came to places like this, nee-san would always act so meddlesome."

"I can kind of imagine that…"

Haruno-san was already active since then and even now she would meddle with her little sister. Since this was back when they were kids, it was no doubt that it was on the level close to bullying when she played around with Yukinoshita.

When I said that, Yukinoshita chuckled. This was probably the first smile she had shown after getting on this ride.

"Yes. She would shake the Ferris wheel, take my hands off the bar on the coasters, and she would do a lot of other things while going 'now, now'. There was also the time when she would keep the coffee cup spinning even when I stopped it… Nee-san looked like she was having lots of fun that time too…"

Yukinoshita's expression would gradually grow dull as she spoke. Just listening made even me feel disheartened too. Wasn't Haruno-san pretty much the main reason why Yukinoshita was bad at the things she was?

"Nee-san's always like that…"

Yukinoshita said briefly.

The ride advanced through the dark, dark course. The vulture robot spoke ominous words. When I looked up past that vulture, the ceiling was just about to open its mouth and the

night sky was peering through. The ride ascended along with the clattering noise. We were almost at the peak. Yukinoshita stiffened her body.

From there, just when we thought the ride was going to plunge downwards, it stopped suddenly. The ride straightened itself horizontally.

When it did, we could see the outside of Destinyland. The sea's active volcano attraction was illuminated brightly red with rising smoke and the group of hotels was gorgeously illuminated with Christmas-oriented lights. In the distance was the visible night view of the new city center.

Most of all, the many lights twinkled like the entire starry sky and the night scenery of Destinyland expanded under our eyes.

Yukinoshita looked at that and let out a short sigh.

"Hey, Hikigaya-kun."

"Hm?"

What locked my turned gaze in place was the white and bluish illuminated White Wall Castle.

And also, garbed in her coat of pure white, smiling with a face that looked like she was about to burst into tears, Yukinoshita.

When I looked at that priceless, yet transient figure, I lost my breath.

Yukinoshita let go of the bar and grasped my cuffs. In that instant when our skins touched, it felt like it had taken a hold of my heart.

Before long, a pleasant floating sensation that seemed like I would continue to fall forever visited me.

"Someday, help me, okay?"

Her whispering voice disappeared along with the descending wind and I was unable to reply back to her.

I think that might have been the very first wish that Yukinoshita Yukino had uttered.

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After I walked for a little bit from the exit of Spride Mountain, there was a shop.

I bought a drink at random from there and went back on the street I came from.

After we got off the ride, Yukinoshita was staggering on her feet so she was resting on the bench that was immediately outside the exit.

When I made it back to the bench, Yukinoshita was in the middle of putting away a thin oblong plastic pouch, which she seemed to have bought without me having been aware of it, in her bag. After she noticed me, she closed her bag and placed it on her lap.

“Here.”

I held out the Christmas version drink in a Pan-san bottle case I just bought from the store and Yukinoshita took it meekly.

“Thank you… How much was it?”

“No, it’s fine. You don’t need to bother. It’s awkward taking money from a sick person.”

“I can’t have that.”

“The ambulance doesn’t take money, right?”

“The firefighters get proper compensation though.”

“The citizens of good will do it free of charge. I’m doing this for self-satisfaction, so just take it.”

“Nothing, but sophistry…”

She squeezed the bottle with both hands while talking in resignation. After that, she gently stroked the shapely Pan-san portion of the bottle with her fingers.

“…Something like this happened before, didn’t it?”

“Really?”

I opened the coffee I bought from the shop earlier as I spoke. Yukinoshita lightly twirled the straw with a bamboo motif that came with the Pan-san bottle.

“Yes. Nee-san was there at the time too.”

“…Aah.”

If I remember correctly, that should’ve been the first time I met Haruno-san. Speaking of which, that time was when I forcefully pushed the plushy I won from the crane game onto Yukinoshita. We encountered Haruno-san immediately after that.

“I was really surprised because you suddenly pointed out accurate things about nee-san…”

She made an abrupt ironic smile as if she was laughing in reminiscence as she spoke.

“It’s just what I thought after looking at her. Besides, she doesn’t smooth it over even when she’s being obvious about it.”

“I suppose so. But I think that’s also nee-san’s charm. Since back then, nee-san was always loved by a lot of people. Even with that personality… No, it’s because of that personality that she was expected of many things as well as being loved and doted on… And she answered to all of that.”

Yukinoshita spoke with a voice that was somehow enthusiastic and depending on how you listened to her, you could’ve thought that she was proudly boasting of her older sister. But that enthusiasm quickly sizzled away.

“I conducted myself like a doll behind her. Because of that, I was told I was obedient and a good, unproblematic girl, but… But I knew… That they were saying a lot of things like how I was unsociable and how I was lacking in charm underneath it all.”

As I made short agreeable responses to Yukinoshita, I sipped my coffee again. It warmed my body, but it tasted awfully bitter.

Obedient, not problematic, and a good girl. Those were probably words that trapped her.

“I was told that too. Unsociable and charmless… Actually, I still get told that even now. By Hiratsuka-sensei.”

“Aren’t you more along the lines of impudent or cheeky or garbage or so?”

“Hey? Wasn’t that last one kind of different?”

When I told her, Yukinoshita cheerfully laughed. Before long, that turned into a gentle smile.

“Both you and nee-san are consistent in your actions and that’s why I think you’re seen like that… But I just didn’t know how I was supposed to act.”

Yukinoshita quietly looked up at the sky. And up there weren’t stars, but the orange light emitted by the lamps. Numerous of them lined up one after the other and were danced from the blowing wind.

“I think in that sense, Hayama-kun and I were definitely the same. It’s because we’ve always been watching nee-san.”

I was surprised when she suddenly brought up Hayama’s name. But Hayama was someone who had known the Yukinoshita sisters far longer than I have and probably even on a closer level too.

That was a domain that I still had no knowledge of.

It’s just even so, Yukinoshita Yukino and Hayama Hayato. I was aware that Yukinoshita Haruno was always at the place where these two would arrive at.

One who continued to project her admiration and enmity to this day.

One who tried to get closer from admiration only to be assimilated to this day.

Just how was Yukinoshita Haruno reflected in the eyes of these two?

And just how did those two see each other?

I started wanting to ask her about it, but even so, I didn’t. I washed away the mouth that was about to say something with the black coffee and jumped into another topic.

“Are you still thinking you want to be like that person?”

At some point during the Culture Festival, Yukinoshita mentioned she held admiration of her in the past.

“I wonder. I don’t think so right now, but… It’s just nee-san has something that I don’t.”

“And you want that?”

Yukinoshita quietly shook her head.

“No, I just thought “why didn’t I have that?” and became disappointed in myself who didn’t have it.”

I felt like I could understand that feeling. Aspiration, envy, and jealousy would eventually be connected to disappointment. Understanding from watching others was always just your own deficiency.

Yukinoshita’s gaze dropped to her hands.

“It’s the same for you too. You have something that I don’t… We weren’t similar at all it seems.”

“Well, yeah…”

We weren’t similar in the least. And yet, there was this aspect close to being half-hearted that repeatedly led me into thinking selfishly, misunderstanding, and getting mistaken about my feelings of myself.

“That’s why I thought I wanted something different.”

After she said that, Yukinoshita adjusted the collars of her coat and directly faced me.

“It’s because I realized that there wasn’t anything that I could do that I started wanting to have something that you and nee-san didn’t have… I thought that if I had that, then I can save something.”

“Save what?”

Just what exactly was it that she needed and what was it that she could save? I wanted to fill in those lacking words so I asked her.

However, Yukinoshita wouldn't tell me.

"…Who knows? What could it be, I wonder?"

Yukinoshita's only response was a girlish smile as if she was testing me.

Perhaps the answer to that question was her "reason".

Why did Yukinoshita Yukino try to become a candidate during that student council election?

Or possibly, what was it that she had yet to talk about or that I didn't try to ask about?

Here I was not asking her about the meaning of those words in that instant when that ride was going to fall. And Yukinoshita didn't touch on it either. She talked about something else in bits and pieces as if substituting for that.

It was like that mistaken wish that someone had where you could understand even if you didn't talk or ask about anything.

I drank the rest of the coffee that was already lukewarm. When I did, Yukinoshita who saw that with her own eyes stood up.

"I'm fine now, so we should get going."

"Yeah."

I answered her and we headed for the plaza. The plans after this should've been to watch the fireworks from the plaza.

The parade was going to end soon. Once that happened, the street that was blocked off would open up.

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I called Yuigahama and got from her a general idea of where we would meet.

Yukinoshita and I walked our way up to the front of the White Wall Castle not talking about anything in particular. When the parade ended, we were able to move around more freely

than earlier because the number of customers around had decreased. Since Yukinoshita also had time to rest, her footsteps looked light as well.

And when we arrived at the plaza, we looked around for Yuigahama.

“Ah, Hikki, Yukinon. Over here!”

Yuigahama waved her arms with a cellphone in one hand. It looked like she was about to call us just now. Once we got together, Yuigahama quickly clapped her hands together and lowered her head.

“Sorry! For going on ahead and stuff.”

“It’s not like it was a big problem.”

When Yukinoshita replied with a smile, Yuigahama patted her chest in relief.

“Well, the others are here too, so I’d feel bad for making them wait on us. Anyway, did you take pictures of the parade?”

“Ah, yeah! Got it all down!”

Yuigahama fiddled with the digital camera and showed the screen as she spoke. For now, we were still here to collect material, so I wanted to at least get pictures of the entirety of this Christmas event.

“See this, Yukinon. Look, look!”

“…Do you mind if I check over the data for a moment?”

When Yukinoshita murmured in a small voice, she clicked her tongue and pressed against her bosom. Apparently she was rather frustrated for missing the Pan-san parade. No, um, if you just said so, we could have gone over there?

The two started to liven up from one thing to another as they looked at the digital camera and well, that's nice, but just where were the others?

It was almost time for the fireworks to start.

And when I scanned over the plaza, there was a voice with a familiar noisiness.

“Huuuh? Where’s Hayato?”

“Aah, Yumiko. Come over here for a sec.”

“Wait, Tobe, what?”

Tobe pulled Miura along and headed in our direction. And following them from behind was Ebina-san.

“Eh, aah. Well, ya know, what to say? This is like an awesome spot, kinda? Ebina-san would prefer it over here, yeah?”

“Eh? Sure, although anywhere is fine really.”

It felt like Ebina-san’s barrier against Tobe’s consideration was really strong…

Anyway, with them here, we were mostly all gathered. Now the remaining ones were Hayama and Isshiki… It was probably because I was looking around that Yuigahama did the same as well and looked around the area. She then asked Tobe.

“Tobecchi, where’s Hayato-kun and Iroha-chan?”

“Eh, aah… Well, they’ll be straight on over here soon.”

Tobe was saying it kind of vaguely, but, well, in this guy’s case, he would normally just say one random thing or the other, after all… I mean, he’s a good guy and all though.

In the meantime, the street lamps and the light decorations around the plaza’s perimeter dimmed. Classical music then started to play.

“It’s starting.”

Yukinoshita looked up at the sky above the White Wall Castle after she spoke. It looked like that area was where the fireworks would go off. As you'd expect from the holder of the year pass, very knowledgeable.

Yuigahama and I looked in the same direction as Yukinoshita.

When we did, the many colored rings of light bloomed profusely in the transparent winter sky. Speaking of fireworks, they tended to be something usually done in summer, but to see

the fireworks flare up in the sky with Orion, expand, and disappear was a surprisingly strange thing to see.

“It’s kind of nostalgic, huh?”

Next to me was Yuigahama who quickly whispered into my ears.

A shiver went up my spine and when I turned my head, Yuigahama was clapping her hands as she went “oooh” seemingly forgetting what she had said just now. Um, you see, the thing is that my focus is completely directed to the surface of the earth right now, so I can’t concentrate at all on the fireworks you know. Lawsuit.

As I didn’t feel like looking up, I spotted familiar looking physiques in my field of vision that flickered from the fireworks.

While the fireworks exploded, the expanding light illuminated the two people shrouded in the darkness.

Hayama and Isshiki were watching the fireworks from a place a little further away from us.

Along with the flickering of the fireworks was the shortening of the distance between the two. When I realized it was like I was watching a shadow play, I was watching only them.

The final burst of lights poured down the night sky.

And in the illuminated plaza was Isshiki who was slowly distancing herself from Hayama as she faced downwards. The remaining Hayama looked up at the sky while Isshiki walked off in the opposite direction.

The music stopped and the radiance of the attractions and the light of the placed street lamps returned.

In the group of customers who sighed in satisfaction, only Isshiki alone looked like she was suppressing something as she squeezed her lips together and she ran past us.

“I-Irohasu!?”

Tobe was the first to notice when she went right past us and he called to her back.

“Hold up, Irohasu!”

Still, Isshiki continued on without turning around and disappeared into the congestion of people.

“Hold on a sec, I’mma go look for her.”

Tobe ran off in a panic. It looked like Miura guessed at what was going on after seeing that. She coiled her hair with her fingers and let out a deep sigh.

“Haa… I’ll go too.”

“Okay, I’ll look as well.”

Ebina-san followed after Miura. Yuigahama then lightly raised her hand to that.

“M-Me too!”

But Miura stopped her there.

“Yui and uh, Yukinoshita-san? should wait here, okay? Since she might come back and stuff. Also, if I find her, I’ll call you so let Tobe and Ebina know.”

When she brushed off her hair annoyingly, she called to Yuigahama and Yukinoshita. Although she didn’t look at all motivated, she handed out explicit instructions.

“Ah, okay.”

When Yuigahama answered, Miura nodded and started walked off quickly.

As Yukinoshita saw Miura go off in the distance, Yukinoshita tilted her head.

“Did something happen?”

Well, the only thing Yukinoshita was looking at were the fireworks after all...

If my conjecture was correct, then only one thing came to mind given the circumstances.

Destinyland during Christmas, the fireworks following the parade, at the front of the White Wall Castle, the time created for just those two, and finally, Tobe’s attitude.

Amassing these was worth a yakuman[72]. It was likely Isshiki confessed to Hayama. That was the only thinkable thing.

“…Well, I’ll get going too.”

“Okay, got it.”

Yuigahama replied and Yukinoshita made another doubtful head tilt in puzzlement.

However, where I was going wasn’t to Isshiki Iroha. Miura could probably handle Isshiki more skillfully. It’d be a lot better for her to go instead of me.

But there was just one person that I thought I definitely had to go see.

Even after Isshiki left Hayama, he didn’t approach us. That meant that he was waiting.

I trekked down the road as the scenery of that shadow play flashed by in my head.

And in the darkness separate from the White Wall Castle was Hayama.

At the moment when everyone’s attention was focused on Isshiki, Hayama slightly walked to this side street.

When Hayama noticed me, he made a seemingly sad smile.

“…Hey there.”

“Yo.”

Hayama leaned against the fence of the plaza and let out a small sigh.

“…I guess I did something bad to Iroha.”

“How selfish. If you’re going to feel guilty afterward, then you should’ve just dated her instead of turning her down.”

When I told him, Hayama made a troubled smile.

“That’s impossible. You have a bad personality to be saying that even though you know what’s going on.”

“Pretty much.”

I had a lot of confidence concerning that point. The corners of my mouth distorted into an unpleasant smile reflexively.

Even so, Hayama didn't get particularly upset and looked at me with eyes that looked stricken with melancholic grief.

"…Did you know? About why Isshiki confessed to me?"

"No, there's no way I'd know that."

"I see…"

But the way Hayama said that was as if up until now, he was conducting himself in a way so that Isshiki wouldn't confess to him.

"Did you know? About Isshiki, er… her feelings or whatever."

"…Yeah."

His answering voice was gloomy. There wasn't a hint of conceit or arrogance in it. Only the feelings of regret were mixed in it. So that's how it was…

Hayama was someone who couldn't maintain a relationship with someone unless he stayed ignorant to their feelings. When a person's feelings didn't get across, then they would distance themselves and leave. That wasn't entirely Hayama's fault, but in order to avoid it, Hayama had to sidestep those feelings altogether.

That was something clear as day during that incident during the field trip as well. And it was that time that I became sympathetic to that kind of thinking. I ended up understanding it. It was something I couldn't call a mistake. However, I knew that to avoid things was something that would turn into hurting others.

"If you knew, then isn't it just a lack of resolve on your part?"

When I said so, Hayama lightly shook his head.

"…That's not it. I'm honestly happy about Iroha's feelings. But that's not it. They were probably not for me but…"

Hayama's staggering voice didn't make any sense. Still, Hayama didn't continue his words even as I waited and jumped into a different topic.

"…You're pretty amazing. The way you just change the people around you… I'm sure Iroha was the same way too…"

"Haa? What's with the sudden praise?"

When I said that, Hayama made a dry laugh.

"Haha, that's not it… I told you, didn't I? I'm not that good of a guy as you make me out to be."

Hayama said those same words he told me back on campus. He then looked down and let out a deep sigh.

"Praising you… is for my sake."

"Why would you do that…?"

When I looked at Hayama in puzzlement, Hayama lightly narrowed his eyes and glared at me.

"It's probably the same reason why you continue to arbitrarily decide that I'm a good guy."

"…It's not like I have a reason at all. I'm just saying what I see."

"Really?"

Hayama replied with a cold voice.

――――Yeah, it's not that. It was something I realized a long time ago. Hayama Hayato wasn't just your everyday good guy. That thin smile of his was all the proof you needed.

Hayama retracted that smile and stood up from the fence he leaned against.

"I'll head on home first. Let everyone know for me."

"Mail them yourself."

"…Right. See you."

Hayama made a bitter smile and lightly raised his hand.

And then, without turning back, Hayama Hayato disappeared into the depths of the darkness.

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The interior of the train that was heading home was silent. Of course, part of it was due to the built up exhaustion, but the biggest reason for this quietness was because Tobe who would talk to Isshiki about various things while being considerate was missing.

It wasn't just Tobe who was missing as Miura and Ebina-san weren't here either.

The lines those three transferred to go home was from the Musashino Line to the Nishi-Funabashi Line while Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and Isshiki took the Keiyou Line, a different route. There wasn't much of a difference in either line for me, but it was a lot of trouble transferring to Nishi-Funabashi so I decided to go with the Keiyou Line.

Although the train was somewhat packed and there weren't seats you could sit in, it wasn't comparable to during the school and work commuting rush. Yuigahama and Yukinoshita would occasionally talk about something, but other than that, they would look outside the window.

When the train proceeded on for about twenty minutes, we were just about to arrive at the Kaihin-Makuhari Station which was Yukinoshita and my stop.

"Well then, I'll be getting off here."

Yukinoshita stood before the door after she spoke. Following her was Yuigahama.

"Ah, I'm getting off here too."

"Aren't you a bit further ahead?"

When I asked her, Yuigahama grabbed Yukinoshita's arm.

"Tomorrow's a day off, so I'm going to stay at Yukinon's place today."

"Ah, that so."

Well, even before, Yuigahama tended to stay at Yukinoshita's place quite often so given the opportunity, then all the more. Their relationship returning back to how it used to be was something to welcome.

That being the case, I had to get off this station as well. But if I did, then Isshiki would be left alone in the train.

"Isshiki, which station are you getting off at?"

I asked her, but Isshiki didn't respond. Instead, she pulled at my blazer's sleeve.

She then silently held out her bag of souvenirs.

"Senpai. It's super heavy."

"It's because you bought too much…"

I took the bag as I spoke. When I did, Yuigahama suddenly smiled.

"…Uh huh, I think that would be better."

"Isshiki-san. Make sure to be very careful."

Yukinoshita-san? Didn't that kind of mean something else?

When we arrived at Kaihin-Makuhari, the two got off the train. Isshiki and I who were left stayed on the train for another three stations.

The station we would get off was the Chiba harbor. From there, we would transfer to the monorail. There weren't very many customers using it at this time right now, so the only ones riding were just us.

The monorail proceeded through the night city brilliance. That same floating sensation from staying suspended at a high altitude I wasn't used to was as if I was riding another attraction.

Isshiki muttered with a sigh as she looked out the window.

"Haa… I guess it was no good…"

"…No, you should've known that going at him right now wasn't a good idea."

My association with Isshiki was short and that applied to Hayama as well since it wasn't like they were really friendly. Even so, I didn't think those two would go through the trouble of closing their distance like that.

With her stare still directed at the window, Isshiki spoke while looking down on the city.

"…I mean, what else could I do? I was all excited and stuff."

"That's surprising. I thought you weren't the type of person to get pushed around by the atmosphere like that."

When I told her, Isshiki's face that was reflected on the window turned into a small smile.

"I'm surprised too. I thought it was going to be a lot stiffer too."

"…Yeah, pretending to have a mind full of love makes you pretty clever or something."

As I tried to continue talking, Isshiki suddenly turned her head and interrupted me.

"I wasn't talking about myself… I was talking about senpai."

"Ha?"

Again, she flung the conversation in a different direction. I thought we were talking about Isshiki, but where did the conversation fly to? Or was she talking about another senpai? Then again, why was I the only one she called senpai, anyway…? Was it because she couldn't remember my name?

As I thought about various things, Isshiki fixedly looked at me. As I thought, she was talking about me. Isshiki laughed and showed a smile.

"There's no way I wouldn't be moved after I saw that."

"Saw what?"

When I asked her, Isshiki corrected her posture seriously and sat up straight. She slowly looked at my eyes and spoke.

"…I'm starting to want something genuine too."

My face turned red to those words. That's right. When we left the club room that time, we happened to meet Isshiki. I reflexively pushed against my brow.

"You were listening…?"

"Your voice was leaking out like normal, you know."

When Isshiki nonchalantly replied, I spoke back with a pathetic voice.

"…Please forget it."

"I won't… I can't."

Isshiki answered with an expression that was more earnest than normal.

"That's why I thought I'd try going forward."

I don't know what genuine thing she wanted. It wasn't necessarily the same thing as the illusion that I had. In the first place, that might not have existed. But Isshiki Iroha most certainly wished for something. I thought that was very noble of her.

I couldn't really think of any worthwhile relieving words, but I looked for the words to tell Isshiki.

"Well, you know. It's basically that. Don't worry about it. It's not like it's your fault anyway."

When I did, Isshiki blinked her eyes in puzzlement. After that, she scooted away to take some distance from me.

"What are you doing? Are you making passes at me while I'm heartbroken? I'm sorry, it's still not possible just yet."

"That's not what I meant…"

Just how did she rationalize that…? Was this some kind of anagram of "don't worry about it" or something? When I was taken aback, Isshiki coughed and closed the distance she took.

"Besides, it's not over yet anyway. In fact, this is a more effective way of approaching Hayama-senpai. People will sympathize with me and the people around me will act reserved too, you knooow?"

“…R-Right. So it’s something like that.”

It’s like, as expected of Isshiki, huh…? When I spoke both impressed and surprised, Isshiki laughed as she puffed out her chest and continued on proudly.

“That’s what it is. Besides, even if you’re turned down, there are things you just have to do. And there’s also that. They’ll become more conscious of the person they rejected you know? They’ll think they’re pitiful, right? It’s normal not to feel apologetic…That’s why, this defeat was just part of the preparations. It’ll be used for next time’s advancement… And, um… I’ll have to try my best.”

She slipped out a small weep and tears formed at her eyes.

You couldn’t tell someone who was trying their best to try their best. Komachi said “I love you” was good enough, but that was something restricted to my little sister. I thought maybe I should pat her head once, but that too was only for my little sister.

“You’re pretty amazing.”

The only thing I could say was this much. When I did, Isshiki looked at me with moist, upturn eyes.

“It’s all your fault senpai that I turned out this way.”

“…No, that’s true for the issue with the presidency, but for other things...”

But without listening to the end, Isshiki moved her face closer and whispered into my ears.

“Please take responsibility, okay?”

And then, my junior made an impish smile.

Chapter 9: Naturally, Isshiki Iroha takes a step forward

It was Monday after school and we were gathering at the student council room.

We were holding a conference for the conference that we would have with Kaihin Sogo High before meeting with them. Heck, a conference for the conference based on the conference of a conference might just be held instead.

Yesterday, I sent a business-like mail to Yuigahama asking her to get in contact with all whom was concerned. Because of that, everyone was dutifully gathering.

The student council members were sitting at one corner of the desk in the conference. In that group, my eyes met with Isshiki's.

Considering what happened the day before yesterday, I was expecting her to be dejected, but that clearly wasn't the case since she didn't look any different from how she usually was. Of course, she very well might've been putting up a brave front though.

Isshiki looked around restlessly at everyone present.

"Um, soooo, what's the reason for everyone gathered here?"

"Objective confirmation and what to do from here on, pretty much."

When I answered, Isshiki replied dubiously with a "haa" that looked like she had a clue but didn't at the same time. Seeing that, Yukinoshita made a sudden frown.

"Isshiki-san, convening is something you are supposed to be doing."

"Y-Yes…"

With Yukinoshita staring darts into her, Isshiki made a jerky response and straightened her posture. But certainly, Yukinoshita was just a tad little scary right now, yes… But we weren't gathered here just so we could lecture Isshiki.

"Hold on, that's not why we're here right now…"

I spoke to try to move the conversation forward, but this time, Yukinoshita shot me a sharp gaze.

“I believe you shouldn’t confuse softheartedness with kindness.”

I get what Yukinoshita wanted to say. Affection, intolerance and reassurance were other things that shouldn’t be confused with each other. Yukinoshita’s strictness was probably something they called a whip of love of sorts for Isshiki.

“But if you’re just strict, then you’ll only come across as coldhearted.”

“That may be true, but if you do every single thing for Isshiki-san, it won’t do her any good, would it?”

When I said something, Yukinoshita would answer right back. Not good, at this rate, our arguments would continue side by side in parallel.

“It’s like I’m getting scolded by my parents…”

When Isshiki muttered with a grumble, Yukinoshita was about to say some reprimanding words again until Yuigahama stopped her.

“N-Now now, I mean, Iroha-chan’s still not used to it, so…”

“…I suppose so.”

When Yuigahama pacified the situation, Yukinoshita backed down.

Well, still, the things Yukinoshita was saying were quite right. Isshiki being able to stand on her own two feet as the president was originally what we hoped for. I wasn’t someone remarkable, let alone imposing, enough to be teaching someone, and incidentally, I wasn’t sure about the pounding in my chest[73], but I had to be some form of support for Isshiki in my own way from here on.

I coughed once and focused my eyes on Isshiki directly.

“Isshiki, do you understand what the problems are right now?”

“Haa, aren’t we lacking money, time, and people?”

“That’s right. So what do we do about that?”

“Ummm… So we’d do something like outsourcing, I think? That’s where we would gather people who can perform things for us and since we lack the money to pay them, we’re now trying to collect money or something like that…”

Isshiki had a proper grasp of the current situation. Although she didn’t look like she was listening to the conversation, she most certainly was. Quite frankly, compared to the committee chairman who was in charge of the Culture Festival and Athletics Festival, it was strange how this felt a lot better even with just this much progress.

After confirming Isshiki’s understanding of things, I continued the conversation.

“And in light of how Hiratsuka-sensei reacted to the acquisition of that budget, it looks like it’ll be difficult. Also, fundraisers are a complete no for me.”

“The latter reason is completely self-centered…”

Yukinoshita let out an amazed sigh. But look here, Yukinon! Gahama-san and Iroha are both nodding their heads, see! If we were to do a fundraiser, according to my rough mental calculations, at worse we’d need at least 5,000 yen per person… That’s impossible… This amount was something I might’ve been able to procure if I cried to my parents, but if I had to pay for something like this, I might as well use that money to destroy the event in its entirety instead. Besides, there was the possibility that we'd have to raise even more money from here on.

With the issue of money finally becoming more realistic, the others in the student council looked at each other. And the one in that group with the most reluctant face was Isshiki. Good grief, this girl was really…

“The current plans aren’t very realistic. Even if we made it happen, only a part of it would work out. And if you consider all the advertising that we did, then the event itself would be lackluster in comparison. It’d be a very disappointing event.”

“Aah, that might be true…”

Isshiki spoke with a sigh as if she had imagined the sight of that disappointing event.

They tried to make it sound cool by calling it “The Music Connecting Now”, but that’s, like, totally out of the question already if the artists coming were limited only to an hour to perform on stage as an ensemble… What exactly was getting connected here…?

“The first thing I want to confirm is regarding that. That is, whether that’s a good thing or not. I want to know what the student council feels about it. By the way, I don’t care for either. In the first place, I’m nothing more than a helper. I’ll do only what I’m told after all.”

When I asked, Isshiki moaned as she crossed her arms and began to speak in contemplation.

“Well, it most certainly isn’t a gooood thing. I mean, we might as well not do it if it’s going to be a shabby event or something. But there’s like no way we can stop now or anything, you knooow. And that’s why I think there’s a part of it that we can’t do anything about.”

In response to her mushy speaking and the lack of motivation in the words she uttered, Yukinoshita pressed against her temples as if she was getting a headache.

“Isshiki-san…”

“N-Now now…”

When Yuigahama was smoothing it over, Isshiki joltingly corrected her words.

“I-I’ll do it! I’ll do it properly!”

Ummmph, it was kind of like she was coerced into it, but whatever.

“So now we know how Isshiki feels about it… So how do you feel about it as the student council?”

“Eh? Ah, let’s seeeee… I wonder?”

Isshiki sent a reserved glance to the other members. When she did, the vice president along with the other members looked at each other and he gradually opened his mouth.

“Well, we all are.”

“Yes, if we’re going to do it properly, then that would be fine…”

The other members responded with nods and after confirming that, Isshiki showed me an ambiguous smile that wandered between embarrassed or problematic.

“…Something like that.”

As expected, the distance between Isshiki and the others was still awkward.

Considering Isshiki's actual communicative ability (cheekiness), it seemed like it could easily get people to open up to her, but the title of presidency and the lack of confidence associated with it might have been connected to her hesitation.

But that was a problem that I couldn't do anything about. But if a successful experience here was connected to her confidence as the president, this situation just might change again.

"Okay. Now, as for what we should do, the first thing is to consider the things obstructing us… Now then, here's a proooblem for you. What could that be?"

"Ha?"

Isshiki's admirable attitude from earlier went off somewhere and she was looking at me as if I was a complete idiot. Damn it, I even went through the trouble of getting everyone excited and posing it like a quiz… Whatever, just answer it, jeez. Or so I thought until Yukinoshita answered before Isshiki had the chance to.

"The structure of the current conference. That would be a consistent parliamentary system."

When I looked, Yukinoshita was slightly raising her hand for some reason. Was it because I turned it into a quiz that her desire not to lose was agitated, perhaps? Waiting for my answer, Yukinoshita looked at me with slightly excited eyes.

"Correct…"

When I answered, Yukinoshita did a fist pump under the table. Mmm, I wanted Isshiki to answer it though… Well, whatever, I'll give her 80,000 points for the correct answer (Hachiman points only)[74].

"Well, it's as Yukinoshita said. In those conferences, we would listen to everybody's opinions and on top of that, we would examine them in detail. Because of that, there was no end to it. There wasn't a person who had the right to call the final decision on things."

When I spoke, Yuigahama tilted her head.

"Isn't that what the other president is doing?"

“At the moment, Tamanawa’s only role right now was leading the conference as well as putting things together. Although he’s gathering everyone’s opinions, he doesn’t make the call to decide things.”

Outwardly, the conferences were active. There weren’t that much people so even if you presented your opinion, it wouldn’t be turned down. That’s why the finer details of the spectrum, the unimportant details were easily decided. But there was no clear sight of the innards at all.

To hold a conference that had no individual who held the right to decide was meaningless. Even if we came up with a final conclusion, there wasn’t an individual who could decide on it.

It’s because everyone was on equal footing that a final ruling couldn’t be passed down.

Tentatively, the people standing at the top were Tamanawa of the Kaihin Sogo side and Isshiki of the Sobu High side. They’re there, yet these two would go “ummm, I wonder about that~?” and wouldn’t settle on what was decided.

As she was listening, Isshiki let out a short sigh as if something came to mind.

“…I guess I might’ve not been the best choice after all, huh?”

Isshiki dropped her head and I told her.

“It’s not like it’s your fault or anything.”

“Senpai…”

Isshiki raised her head and looked at me with moist eyes. That’s why I nodded in response and continued my words.

“The one at fault is the one who pushed the presidency onto you obviously.”

“Um, that’s senpai though…”

Isshiki answered with an astonished expression. Well, it’s that. “I'm not the one at fault, society is” was an important mindset to have too, you know?

“Anyway, speaking of now in particular, the problem is that everyone’s being considerate of each other and there isn’t a clear hierarchical relationship.”

Properly speaking, the very first thing that should’ve been determined was who had the right to pass down decisions at the very end before considering things like win-win relationships, equal footing discussions, or a group with no top or bottom structure. Because it wasn’t decided at the very beginning, things turning out the way it did was inevitable.

“...That's why we eliminate that pretentious friendliness and have a proper conference. The kind of conference that draws a fine line between the winner and loser where we refute, oppose, and antagonize each other.”

When I said that, the vice president made a difficult face.

“Oppose, huh...? So you're saying we should start presenting dissenting opinions from here on?”

“Yeah, just keep shooting ideas out and completely reject them. I definitely don't want to do a fundraiser too.”

“So that's the reason...”

Yuigahama was astounded, but the things I didn’t like were the things I didn’t like. Besides, having to accept a sham that was decided by that kind of conference was something, now, that I didn’t like.

But this was just my side of the story. I should entrust the remaining conclusion to the others.

“Isshiki, that's all for my suggestion. As the student council, what are you going to do?”

“Eh, I have to decide? Is it really okay for me to...?”

When I suddenly shifted the conversation to her, Isshiki looked around restlessly. Her gaze was directed at the other student council members.

“…W-What would be good, I wooonder?”

The vice president reacted to that question.

“I… feel it’d be better to not cause any trouble. I think suggesting a counter-proposal considering the timing might be a bit difficult, not to mention we never did object to it in the first place, and I’m not sure what to think of rumors spreading of us getting into a dispute about that…”

This vice president was a man of common sense. I could call him a conservative too. Either way, I was grateful that this kind of person was Isshiki’s support.

“I guess soooo.”

After Isshiki said that, she groaned and thought for a moment. But Isshiki suddenly lifted her face and said to the vice president with a smile.

“But we’re going to do it.”

“Eh?”

The student council president, Isshiki Iroha, faced the confused vice president and declared.

“Personally, I’m not so sure I’d like it being a shabby event, you knoooow.”

Those words caused Yukinoshita to press against her temple while Yuigahama made a wry smile. However, I ended up impressed. I wasn’t sure what her actual intentions were, but for her to spit out a super selfish reason at this point in time made me realize she might’ve been a big shot after all.

If we reached a conclusion, then preparing a counter-proposal was necessary. In the conference, what made us inferior to Kaihin Sogo High was the amount of words that we spoke, essentially the core of which that formed our opinions. That’s why we needed to prepare, otherwise, we wouldn’t be able to exchange blows with them.

“Well, why don’t we think about what we should do?”

I stood before the whiteboard of the student council room and noisily wrote down “To Do”. These words were lacking in motivation if I say so myself. After that, a first year girl in glasses who was watching let out a small “ah” and stood up to take my place to write on the board. Apparently this girl was the secretary.

Once I was in my seat again, Isshiki looked at me worriedly with a groan.

“Even if you say that, I don’t really have anything I want to doooo.”

“…I guess so. Me neither.”

When I replied, Isshiki made an astounded sigh.

“Well, that’s no gooood…”

“That’s fine. If we’re just doing what we want to do, that’s no different from horsing around. It’s because you’re doing the things you don’t want to do and that are painful that they call it work.”

When I said that, sitting across from me was Yukinoshita tapping on her temple with her fingers.

“…Putting aside your concept of labor, what you’re saying is certainly accurate. The current plans aren’t at all in the interests of the visiting guests.”

“Ah, I see…”

Isshiki nodded. That’s right. The plan that Tamanawa and his group cooked up were simply focused on what they wanted to do and it didn’t consider the targeted users. Sure, there were plenty of elderly people who liked music. But there were also a lot of people who didn’t have much interest in it as well. Besides, wouldn’t it be boring to the kindergartners? Obviously, this was contingent on what songs and plays were chosen, but they clearly weren’t thinking of those details at all. They were proclaiming things like the customer side, but it was the complete opposite.

The objective of the event was mistaken. Because in the first place, what we wanted to do was completely irrelevant.

It looked like Isshiki understood all of that. But that was where the conversation halted.

“…But what exactly should we doooo?”

When she asked, I thought for a little.

“There’s plenty of ways to move the work along, but… Well, it’s that. The main idea of working is in how much you don’t work.”

“That sounds totally contradictory …”

On the side was Yuigahama who looked at me with apathetic eyes. How rude…

“It’s not a contradiction. If I have to work even though I don’t want to, that’s when I’ll actually think about what to do. If I just skip or rest, it’ll just make things more of a pain. In that case, it becomes a problem of how I would go about getting things done efficiently.”

“Even though your beginning points are completely nonsensical, the conclusion feels somehow on the mark…”

Yukinoshita was pressing against her temple looking like she had a headache.

Of course my conclusion was on the mark. The source was from the history of mankind.

Technological advancements were always born from the feelings of things being a pain and the desire of not wanting to work. In other words, I, who didn’t want to work since it was too much of a pain, could be said to be part of that advanced mankind. Especially recently, I’ve been thinking that I was a real bothersome guy, particularly, today.

Well, it didn’t matter about me right now. Right there, there was something I had to tell Isshiki.

“When you’re thinking about these kinds of things, identifying problems at the beginning is a pain. Instead, you just need to counter with problems that already exist.”

I took out Tamanawa’s created resume from my bag as I spoke.

“And speaking of now, we have this plan which we can find a lot of faults with. Don’t worry. It’s hard to think of a lot of bad things to say about regarding yourself, but it’s easy when it comes to badmouthing other people. And this happens to be your specialty Isshiki. Give it your best shot.”

“Senpai, just what do you take me fooor…?”

“Yeah, yeah. Just try it for a bit with everyone.”

I then passed down the task to Isshiki who was mumbling complaints and the other student council members. After that, I exchanged brief looks with Yukinoshita and Yuigahama and we decided to watch over Isshiki and the others quietly.

If the student council members saw that we were silent and not bringing up any of the problems, then they would earnestly start tackling the issue themselves. It's not like it was a problem with a lack of motivation or anything.

Upon finding a topic that would trigger a conversation, the silence in the student council room gradually filled with discussion and a steady stream of problematic points regarding the plan were brought up. Occasionally, Isshiki and the others would even show smiles to each other in between.

Umu, as expected, people grew closer when it came to insulting others.

When I thought it was about time they identified enough problems, I spoke up.

"What's left is just to construct a plan by working backwards from here."

I could hear a small whisper saying "so that's how it is". When I looked, Yukinoshita was folding her arms.

"…If you're taking it in that direction, then it looks like we can come up with a plan then. Ultimately though, the budget, time, and people are still problems."

"Then that just means we'll have to think of things that won't take up money and time."

"But if we don't use any money, won't it just turn out shabby anyway, hmmm? I feel like that's tooootally out of the question too or something."

Isshiki spoke in dissatisfaction and Yuigahama pounded her hands.

"Oh I know, that thing! How about a homemade feeling kind of thing in a family-oriented way!? Or something."

"I think that's something up to interpretation by those on the receiving end and not those on the giving end…"

Yukinoshita listened to her and said those very logical words.

But Yuigahama also had a point.

In summary, what was needed was the conversion of ideas.

It wasn't something that would be fine if you threw money at it. Movies that sold itself on its production cost usually crashed and burned. Especially live action movies of anime. No one's asking for those, damn it.

Just how could we replace the negative images of incompleteness, lack of uniformity, and negligence with positive images like a homemade feeling and simplicity? Thinking of those things was necessary.

Aah, maybe it's something like that. Maybe it's something like a slightly adult video done by an amateur or something… It's because it wasn't done by a professional that you could enjoy it. Things like its crudeness or its naturalness or its realism or even that feeling where it was within your reach. No, in fact, maybe even paradoxical literacy elements present in everyday life like extraordinariness, secrecy, and the acting that wasn't really acting at all or something… Phew. Yeah, I got the gist of it.

"It must be that. The elementary students and also the nursery. We'll have those kids do some things for us. The cheapness of their labor along with that feeling of amateurism can be used as weapons."

"…I see. You thought of something good."

Yukinoshita was looking at me with incredibly glistening eyes. It's just that the source of my idea was a little questionable, so it was hard to meet her eyes back. My answering voice felt like it was going to sound high-pitched too.

"Eh, ah, yeah, right. I mean, you see it in CMs right? Like, when they have trouble, they show animals and stuff, you know?"

But since Yukinoshita was concentrating on putting her thoughts in order, she wasn't looking my way anymore.

"Certainly, if we show a play done by the children, no one would complain. It seems like it'd go well with the elders as well. That means it'll all be dependent on what we do."

Yukinoshita looked at Isshiki and the other student council members as she spoke.

“Aah, yes. Maybe something like a soooong…?”

“Or a play…”

Isshiki and the secretary-chan with braids answered.

“If it’s a song, then that overlaps with music…”

The vice president said that and followed along.

With this, the matter was mostly settled. I stood up and wrote “Play” on the board.

“Then, a play it is. Nurseries tend to do have Parent’s Day, don’t they? They might have things like props and costumes there.”

When I said that, Yukinoshita nodded.

“So now the remaining problem is time for practice.”

“Remembering lines sounds hard…”

Even though Yuigahama wasn’t going to appear in the play, she let out miserable voice. I guess Yuigahama’s not very good at memorization huh… Still, this play wasn’t a test. We’re allowed to at least skimp on some things.

“…How about we split the groups into actors on stage and actors who read the lines?”

“Do you mean like having voice actors?”

“Yeah, that way you don’t have to remember anything.”

“Wow, amazing. As usual, you’re really something when it comes to thinking of ways to cut corners.”

I’m extremely and humbly delighted for your praise… Now, let’s stop saying those things with such a nice smile, okay?

Well, in reality, voice actors really did have it rough and I heard they were actually trying really hard. We had to focus on practice and rehearsal, but considering it’s on the level of a schools festival here, this kind of thinking worked too.

With this, we had a rough idea of the direction to head in. As long we took note of the how long things would take, we should be able to get it done.

“So, that’s how it’s going to be…”

Isshiki turned around to the other student council members with a lack of confidence. When she did, the vice president and the other members returned a nod. Seeing that, Isshiki showed a smile.

Yuigahama happily talked to Isshiki.

“Since you guys went through the trouble of thinking it up, it’d be nice if you can do it!”

“I suppose soooo. Well, it’d be nice if we can.”

“So we just need to split the time so we can hold our play and their concert at the same time. So why not trying suggesting that at the conference today?”

When I said that, Yuigahama and Isshiki both looked at me with their heads tilted. What’s with you two and that stupid childish reaction…?

“…Is that, really possible?”

“No, I don’t have a clue. Well, even if we do it together, then there’re probably a few things that can be done.”

“Haa, I see…”

Isshiki looked either convinced or not as she nodded with a distracted expression.

Something liked by everyone didn’t exist. Therefore, there were probably people who didn’t like Tamanawa and the others’ plan. For those people, we could cater to their tastes and we would have a higher total amount of satisfied visitors. Obviously there would be people dissatisfied by what we would do, but Tamanawa’s plan might catch their fancy instead.

By opposing them, we were able to draw out a scheme like this.

“Okay, as for the rest, try your best to work out the details so you can present it until the conference.”

I said that and stood up from my seat.

“Yes, er, eh!? Where are you going!? Are you saying I should be the one doing the presentation!?”

Isshiki quickly shot up her head and looked at me twice. When she did, Yukinoshita who stood up right after me brushed the hems of her skirt and placed her hand on her chin.

“The presentation is something the student council should be doing after all. We’re here only to help.”

When Yukinoshita spoke, Yuigahama placed her hand on her worn coat and spoke as she smiled.

“Ah, but, see. If you have trouble at the conference, Hikki and Yukinon will help you out!”

“You’re not going to help, huh…? Well, Isshiki. Try your best. I’ll buy the snacks for today.”

I said that and left the student council room.

There was still some time left before the meeting. We decided to kill some time by buying things for the conference at the convenient store and headed for the entrance.

“I hope the conference goes well.”

Yuigahama spoke as she adjusted her muffler.

“Well, it should be fine. Even if it doesn’t get through to them, we’ll make sure it does. I want this to end already.”

I said so casually, but Yuigahama stopped in her tracks. When I turned around, Yuigahama was looking at me with serious eyes.

“…Does that mean you’re going to do something, Hikki?”

Behind Yuigahama was Yukinoshita who was also standing still. I couldn’t see what emotions were filled in those slightly concealed eyes of hers.

“…Well, I’ll think of something when the time comes. Honestly, we won’t know unless we try.”

I answered as sincerely as I could within the scope of what was possible for my current self. Even so, it wasn’t like I had a lot of ways to do things at my disposal. Yuigahama looked like

she understood that as well as she caressed her bun hair and while still looking down, she spoke.

“Hikki… Isn’t that something you don’t like?”

“Even there are things I don’t like.”

“Then…”

As she said that, Yuigahama lifted her head. Before hearing the rest of her words any further, I voiced my answer.

“…What I don’t like is giving in to that superficial discussion. It’s something I hate the most.”

As I said that, I looked away and scratched my head. When it came to mind how I was reveling in that kind of superficiality before, I thought I had the gall to be saying something like that.

Even so, I couldn’t be content with accepting that kind of sham anymore.

A momentary silence passed by.

And then, a faint sigh could be heard. When I adjusted my sight back, ahead was Yukinoshita expressing a smile.

“You should do as you like.”

Her voice was softer than usual and her flowing words were straight to the point.

“…Uh huh, got it.”

Even though Yuigahama didn’t look convinced somehow, she still nodded in silence.

It probably wasn’t like they understood everything. Or possibly, they might’ve just given up instead.

My words twisted inside in my mouth and without uttering them, I nodded back.

We didn’t say anything more between the three of us as we went outside.

The setting sun that crawled out onto the campus encompassed by the winter sea winds was just slightly warm.

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The conference for the Christmas collaborative event that started on schedule was cooling down from its craze as time ticked by.

The student council president of Kaihin Sogo High, Tamanawa, made a stumped smile and let out a sigh.

And the student council president of Sobu High, Isshiki Iroha, clicked her tongue that only I, who was sitting nearby, could hear as she was smiling.

The discussion between these two had been running in parallel since a while ago.

“Yeah, I feel that way of thinking could work, but I think there’s some meaning behind both schools doing it together. If we do things separately, the SYNERGY effect would disappear and it’d be a DOUBLE RISK, don’t you think?”

“Maaaybe, but personally, I’m thinking I want to totally do this toooo, you knooow? Wouldn’t it be toootally beneficial if there were two things to watch?”

I wasn’t sure how many times I’ve listened to this exact exchange.

Tamanawa would endlessly go on with his katakana lingo while Isshiki would adjust the direction of her head and the angle of her face and during that, she would talk back sweetly and act adorably flirtatious.

This scene continued ever since the opening of the conference.

When the conference began, Tamanawa started off first by proposing a share of the supplementary budget. In response to that, Isshiki started off with “like, I’ve been thinking just a tiny bit, buuut” and launched a kind of counter punch by presenting our plan of doing a play. Still, the enemy wasn’t to be underestimated as they exhibited the universal compromise of inserting the play during the intermission of the current plan. Of course, Isshiki used the reason that the issue of money wasn’t solved at all and suggested to reduce the workload by breaking the event into two parts with the music and the play.

So things were developing as I had expected. In a way, Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I were relieved by seeing this pre-established harmony as we were watching over them attentively.

But now that we were at this point, the conference suddenly stagnated. And just like earlier, Isshiki and Tamanawa were bouncing back and forth between each other.

Next to me, Yukinoshita let out a sigh. What a coincidence, I was feeling the same way. And then, she whispered to me in a way that wouldn't disrupt the conference.

"I wonder if Isshiki-san's okay… I could hear her clicking her tongue earlier…"

"Who knows? It looks like she's trying a lot of things, but…"

"I understand how she feels quite well…"

Yukinoshita spoke in exhaustion and let out another sigh.

Both Yukinoshita and I left the presentation to Isshiki and preferred to support Isshiki when necessary, but seeing how the discussion wasn't heading anywhere, we couldn't really interject. When I thought about what to do, Yuigahama sitting to my right nudged my shoulders.

"Hikki, why are they arguing over this?"

"…What would you think if you were suddenly told to do things separately in two parts when you thought you were going to do things together?"

Yuigahama moaned as she thought and then spoke.

"It'd give off kind of a bad feeling…"

"A division and a breakdown… True, it would definitely leave a bad impression."

Yukinoshita nodded her head. Well, that's probably what Tamanawa was concerned about.

I glanced at Tamanawa to confirm that. When I did, Tamanawa noisily typed away on the keyboard of his Macbook Air in exaggeration. He then nodded and spoke.

"I think that play would be a very good idea. That's why if we start back at the CONCEPT, then if we went in the direction of a COLLABORATION of the music and the play as one, then that's another way of thinking about it."

He presented another universal compromise. Isshiki smiled with a “fufu” to that.

“Well, suuure, it’ll be one. But that’s nooot what I’m thinking about, you knoow? And also, there’s still the problem with the budget, riiight? If we did that, in the end, we won’t be able to do anything anyway or something.”

After she said that, Isshiki expressed an embarrassed laugh and stuck out her tongue. However, her eyes weren’t laughing in the least.

“Then we should all think about that together. That’s the reason for the conference after all.”

Tamanawa replied with something he once said at some point before. At this rate, we’d find ourselves in an infinite loop

After that, at the corner of my eyes, an unexpected individual had stood up. It was our vice president.

“Um, do you mind if I ask you something? What’s your reason for being opposed to breaking it into two parts?”

“Hmm, it’s not that I’m in opposition to it. I just think if we shared a VISION, then we could make the event feel more unifying. Even if we think of the IMAGE strategy points, I think it’d be better to avoid veering off from the general framework of this collaborative EVENT.”

Since an objection stemmed from an unexpected source, Tamanawa thought for a little and continued.

“This is just a FLASH IDEA, but if we go with a two part PROGRAM, we can create 2 GROUPS by mixing the two high schools together. Maybe a SOLUTION like that could work too…”

“But we totally won’t make it in time, don’t you think? We've already done our preparations here toooo.”

Isshiki supported the vice president. They didn’t prepare anything at all, but she probably realized that the situation wouldn’t move forward if she didn’t say this.

When she did, a single hand from the student council of Kaihin Sogo High was raised. Seeing that Tamanawa was under fire, that person came to his aid.

“If it’s a problem with time, instead of making up a new plan now, wouldn’t it be more efficient if we cooperated and limited things to one as originally planned? And the COST PERFORMANCE would be pretty good, particularly how expenses are efficiently dealt with.”

And then the argument regressed.

As I did the minutes of those exchanges, I was suddenly taken in by a strange feeling of discomfort.

Tamanawa wasn’t opposed to the entire plan of breaking things into two parts. Yet he was adamant in doing things together. What was the reason for that? I opened my mouth in order to find the real meaning behind this feeling of discomfort.

“…Do we really have to do it collaboratively?”

“We can have a large EVENT through collaboration which will bring about GROUP SYNERGY.”

“I don’t see anything synergistic about this. Besides, you say large, but at this rate, we’re not going to be doing anything worthwhile. Yet, why are you still so fixated on it?”

When I noticed, I was questioning him critically. In the same way towards me, there were whispers.

The greatest mistake of this conference was the nonexistence of rejection. At the very beginning, there was no rejection. That’s why even if something was wrong, no one could correct it.

I also wasn't able to reject anything. Just maybe, this way of creating things existed too. That’s what I had thought.

They were acting reserved with each other. They were being considerate with each other. By saying that, lies were being exchanged.

However, that wasn't it. By all means, getting rejected wasn’t a bad thing at all.

There were things you could understand for the first time once you saw that you were wrong. Complete affirmation of worthless things with no substance was the harshest form of denial. And that was something that would probably be rejected too.

Tamanawa spoke rapidly as if he was in a fluster.

“It strays off from the intentions of the plan. Besides, we even got a CONSENSUS, and we were able to share a GRAND DESIGN and…”

True, we did have a consensus and we also came up with a grand design together.

By acting ignorant for the sake of an answer that could convince everyone, everyone was forced to put up with it, the pain was pushed on to everyone and this caused everyone to inhibit themselves.

It was already decided. Those who objected were heretics. By implicitly coercing them with those thoughts, they forcefully gained approval.

And the moment everything collapsed on itself, they would say this: That everyone had decided on it. They would divide the responsibility between each other and lighten the load on their hearts, pushing the blame onto a nameless individual. And at the very end, because “everyone” had decided on it, they would coerce each other into accomplices. Yeah, it was exactly like a hollow box somewhere.

That’s why I needed to reject it. Although I couldn’t say that I was just at all. But it was because I was able to reject that I realized where I was wrong. In that case, there was no way I could accept this conclusion. I knew what I did wrong. But the world was much more wrong.

I stared at Tamanawa. Then the corners of my mouth distorted.

“…Wrong. You’re acting conceited by thinking you can do it. That’s why you can’t accept that you were wrong. That’s because you want to hide your failures. And to do that, you’re trying to make use of the plan and words to get commitment from others so you can feel relieved. Because when you’re wrong, it feels a lot better to make it someone else’s fault.”

Unintentionally, my voice was mixed with self-deprecation as if I was looking at someone just a while ago.

A gentle space with no rejection was probably like a dream. The superficial arguments remained in the minutes while only the conference in name continued. That way, you could fool yourself.

But that was a sham.

It was sudden. My voice swelled. The ripples that were small, however, slow reverberated. The vortex of my voice entrapped the area around me and stares lacking in warmth were directed at me.

“That’s not the thing, see, I just think it’s a lack of COMMUNICATION, you see.”

“Let’s COOLDOWN for a bit and after we calm down, we can talk it over again…”

There was a cold stickiness in the voice coming from the Kaihin Sogo side. However, their attitudes didn’t change even until the very end. They tried to put out feelers to reconcile the rejection of their side and tried to find out what was wrong.

But there was a voice that destroyed that.

“If you want to play a game of make-believe, could you do that somewhere else?”

The voice wasn’t loud in the least, yet just those words caused the place to submerge in silence.

The owner of the voice continued further.

“For a while now, all I’ve been hearing are nothing but empty talk, but is it really that fun pretending to hold a conference and acting like you’re doing work using words you just remembered?”

There wasn’t a single person other than Yukinoshita Yukino who had opened their mouth. Her provocative voice turned into something gradual.

“You get involved in discussions with vague words and you think you understand, yet not a single thing was done. There’s no way you’d be able to move forward like that… Nothing will be created, nothing will be gained, and nothing will be provided… That’s nothing but a sham.”

When I casually looked to the side, Yukinoshita was gripping her fist and looking down.

But when she raised her head, she had a frigid expression with strong eyes looking forward.

“Could you not waste our time any more than this?”

It was like the Training Room forgot what sound was. Everyone was taken aback by Yukinoshita's intensity and lost their words. A vacuum was born that enveloped the arguments that endlessly continued in a circle.

"Ummm, it might just be a little too hard, so rather than force ourselves to work together, wouldn't it be better to think that it'd be to have fun by doing things twice? That way, the individuality of our schools would show."

Yuigahama diligently tried to fill in the gap with her brightness. She then shot the conversation towards a sitting individual who was still dumbfounded.

"Right, Iroha-chan?"

"Ah, yes. I-I think that would be good…"

And then, Yuigahama slightly shot her glance forward. Ahead was Orimoto Kaori.

"H-How is it? Good?"

"Eh, ah, sure… Sounds, good?"

Orimoto answered reflexively to the question she was suddenly asked. She didn't sound very confident with her answer and she faced the people beside her. When she did, they nodded back.

When the conference that had no individuals with objections inclined towards that one affirmation, it came to an end like an avalanche.

But finally, the long, long conference came to a full stop.

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With the conference over, the Training Room was returning back to its liveliness. Sobu High's student council reached a conclusion in the conference and we could finally get started on the preparations for the event. On top of the desk were books and material plastered all over and we were meeting about what to do for the play.

As I looked at those with a sidelong glance, Isshiki was upset with both Yukinoshita and I where the three of us were still standing up. Yuigahama was watching us with a wry smile.

“Why did you two go and blurt out stuff like that, hmmm? The mood’s just the worst, you knooow? Didn’t you think we could lose this event, hmmm?”

Isshiki was crossing her arms in front of the white board. Her face with her swollen cheeks was viciously cute.

“I didn’t say anything wrong.”

Yukinoshita averted her face as if she was sulking. Seeing that, leaking from Isshiki’s mouth was her mood. It looked like she was upset.

“You may be correct, but you have to pay more attention to the mood and a lot of others things, you knooow?”

When Isshiki said that, Yukinoshita averted her face again or so I thought because for some reason she was looking at me.

“If you’re expecting that man to read the mood, then that’s pointless. Even at the club, all he does is read sentences.”

“That’s a shame. As an avid reader of the class, I can read between the lines quite well. Besides, weren’t you the one who got mad just now?”

When I said that, Yukinoshita had a doubtful head tilt.

“Isshiki-san just recognized I was right, didn’t she? Then I don’t have a reason to be angry.”

“Aah, that’s what I’m talking about when I said you were angry. Listen to what I’m saying.”

When I replied back to her, Isshiki tapped on the white board.

“Ummm, are you two listening to meee? I’m saying it to both of you, you knooow?”

“N-Now now, it’s fine since it cooled down nicely and all.”

Watching on the side was Yuigahama who mediated the situation and Isshiki let out a sigh and backed off. Yuigahama followed up further after Isshiki who was slightly pouting.

“We didn’t lose the event, so we should be happy with that. Right?”

“…Haa, well, it’s not like that’d be a big deal or anything. Besides, well… I feel a lot better anyway.”

As the contradicting individual that I was, I was saying something like how she wasn’t being very honest at all. Still, to think that Isshiki who was supposed to not have any motivation for student council related activities would be concerned about the existence of the event.

That Isshiki was perplexed as she groaned.

“But this and that are two different things, you knoow? It’s super hard to do things now.”

“Aah, well, sorry about that.”

In regards to that, normally speaking, I was in the wrong, so I apologized obediently. To this day, Isshiki and I were the ones who negotiated directly with Tamanawa, but from this incident, I doubt he was in the mood to talk with me. That being the case, Isshiki was forced to take on the responsibility of various things on my end.

“True, it would be a problem if we can’t coordinate with each other… Even if we’re doing different things, we still share the general framework. Maybe it might be a tad difficult to work together after all…”

Yukinoshita placed her hand on her chin as she thought and Yuigahama raised her hand.

“Iroha-chan and I can follow up on communication related stuff.”

“Eeeh, me toooo?”

“You’re the representative, that’s a given.”

Isshiki said so unpleasantly and Yukinoshita quickly chided her.

“Y-Yes…! But like, it was Yukinoshita-senpai’s fault…”

With Yukinoshita glaring at her, Isshiki coughed and brushed it off. She then quietly whispered into my ear.

“Senpai, Yukinoshita-senpai’s really scary…”

No, that's actually her still being nice, but I couldn't say it. I mean, she's like totally glaring daggers at Isshiki right now too. The Yukinon EARS could hear everything…

"Isshiki-san, can we confirm the allotment of the time and budget with the other side? Also, I want to calculate the exact expenses we have presently as well."

"Ah, then, shall we do it with the secretary?"

When Isshiki spoke, the two accompanied each other and headed for where the other officers were.

At the moment, I had nothing else to do so I pulled a seat nearby and fell back onto the chair and was looking at the ceiling. There wasn't a single person who approached me in the area and this empty void of time flowed by.

Sometimes I felt stares. I was supposed to have been used to the kinds of stares that looked at something odd and the whispering voices, but since it was a long time since I was conscious of it, it felt strangely nostalgic. And that feeling was the same towards Yukinoshita.

"Hikigaya."

As I was sitting, Hiratsuka-sensei was looking down on me from above. Just how long had she been there?

"You came by?"

"I just came to check on things while I was in the middle of something."

Hiratsuka-sensei didn't sit, seemingly not planning to stay long. I felt uncomfortable being the only one sitting so I stood up. When our faces got closer, Hiratsuka-sensei looked at me fixedly and made a bitter laugh.

"Looks like you were quite obtrusive again, huh?"

Aah, she was here that time too, huh… I got bashful from having that stunt seen since it was a little embarrassing and Hiratsuka-sensei inspected the interior of the Training Room. And what she was looking at was Yukinoshita.

"Still, for that girl to act like that… It's a little surprising."

“Well, I suppose so…”

I gave a meaningless response. Even I was convinced that what Yukinoshita said that time was surprising. But I felt like I couldn’t describe it well in words. Even so, Hiratsuka-sensei nodded in response.

“If you’re going to be hurt together, then that might actually not be painful at all… The beauty of being out of tune, huh?”

“Come again?”

I questioned her, not understanding the mutter she let out. When I did, Hiratsuka-sensei talked without looking at me.

“To get hurt and to be twisted… Also, to be rebellious; for those who are watching, there are things they would think as beautiful. And in that, there would surely be value in it… I don’t dislike those kinds of things.”

She then turned around to me. And her eyes were seemingly sorrowful.

“But at the same time, there’s also fear. Because you end up thinking whether if this was good enough. The happiness of not being understood by others could be called a closed happiness, after all.”

“Isn’t that kind of bad?”

When I asked, Hiratsuka-sensei slowly shook her head. Her long, glossy black hair gently flowed back and forth.

“I wonder… That’s something that you can only check with the teachers during semester exams. That’s why I’ll at least continue asking you. So you should continue thinking about it as well.”

She parted with those words and left the Training Room. As I watched her off from behind, I dug around for the words I had to respond with.

What I wished for probably wasn’t a relationship that was conventional in society. It was probably something where you dragged down the hand you took along with you to the sea bed. It was a terribly self-centered sentiment.

There was no need to say it. From here on as well, I'll continue to ask, answer, and think for a long time.

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With the long day over, I was on my way home. I lethargically pedaled my way home from the community center.

When I made it to the neighborhood of my house, the sound of pedaling came from behind me. The hell? Tch, talk about annoying, I'm busy biking you know. As I thought that, I gave way to the street and took the sidewalk. Even so, the pedaling didn't stop.

I turned around, getting sick and tired of it.

When I did, Orimoto was following right behind me on her bike. When she looked at my face, she snickered.

"Oh, ignoring me? Hilarious."

"…Right. No, it's not that hilarious."

If I thought about it normally, it should've been obvious given that we went to the same middle school, but Orimoto and my house weren't all that far apart. If we headed in the same direction from the same place at the same time, you didn't have to be Takeshi-kun the Arithmetic[75] to know there was the possibility that we would bump into each other.

Orimoto's bike lined up with mine.

"So you were still living in this area."

"Well, it's my actual house after all…"

"Aaah, I guess so. It's because we, like, never meet in the area you see."

Well, it's because I really didn't want to meet anyone that I barely leave the house… And speaking of rankings of things I didn't want to meet, Orimoto was in a rather high position on the list, but we could do with not having to mention that.

"Ah, could you hold on a teensy bit?"

Orimoto placed her bike in front of the vending machine as she said that. As for the rankings of things I didn't want to wait for, Orimoto was high on there too, but once I was told to, then I had no choice but to do so. Still straddling my bike, I waited patiently. As I did, Orimoto was buying drinks from the vending machine.

"Here, my treat."

Orimoto spoke and held out a warm can of tea. What's this? It wasn't MAX Coffee? But complaining about something given to you was out of the question. I took it obediently.

After that, Orimoto then raised up the other can she bought.

"Yaaaay!"

"Y-Yeah…"

We hit our cans together seemingly wanting to do a toast. Orimoto then opened her can and talked to me as she drank from it.

"Hikigaya, you sure have changed. Like back then, I thought you were super boring too."

"T-That so?"

…U-Uh huuuuh. W-Was that how people saw me? Wasn't that information like totally not needed?

In fact, the word "changed" caught my attention. Did I really change all that much from how I was in middle school? I probably did. I was taller and the number of English words I could remember increased. Also, I wasn't profusely sweating when I was talking with Orimoto. There were plenty of other different things, but it might've been more appropriate to call that starting over from the beginning than actually changing.

"But to think someone's boring might've been a problem with the person who thought so, huh?"

Orimoto said so with a tedious looking face. She then put the tea can to her mouth, gulped it down, and let out a sigh.

"But, I guess dating Hikigaya is still totally out of the question."

“No, it’s not like I asked now or anything…”

I did ask a long time ago, yes, a long time ago. And since it was a long time ago, forget about it, please.

“Then again, what’s the deal all of a sudden?”

“Like today, didn’t you say something out of nowhere? Normally if your boyfriend was like that, you totally wouldn’t be able to stand it, you know. Totally don’t get what you meant either.”

When I asked, Orimoto spoke as she cackled seemingly laughing while reminiscing of something. But she suddenly withdrew her laugh and looked down the road. In the direction she was looking was where our middle school was supposed to be.

“But as a friend, it might work out. You’re hilarious after all… Well, whatever though.”

When she said that, Orimoto threw the can of tea in the trash and straddled her bike.

“But like, thanks to Hikigaya and that girl, our side is totally getting into it. Our president’s like really motivated now. Like we’ll totally win and all.”

“Well, it’s not really a match though…”

When I said so, Orimoto tilted her head.

“Really? Well, whatever. Seeee you.”

“Yeah. Ah, thanks for the tea.”

Orimoto lightly raised her hand to my gratitude and she started pedaling on her bike. I drank the remaining tea in one gulp and threw the empty can into the trash. When I did, a little further away, the sound of screeching brakes of a bike could be heard.

“Hey.”

“Ah?”

When I looked in the direction which I was called from, Orimoto was still on her bike and only her head was facing my way.

“The next class reunion, why don’t you come Hikigaya?”

“I won’t. Definitely.”

“I thought so, hilarious.”

“No, no it’s not.”

When I said that, Orimoto chuckled and biked away. I didn’t watch her distant back as I faced in the opposite direction and pedaled.

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The morning after the night since that meeting, the Training Room of the community center was wrapped in a busy atmosphere. Although we were settled on doing a play, we weren’t decided on what kind of play we would do.

But after Isshiki’s mysterious instruction of “for now, an angel should appear riiight?”, we were now in rapid progress of creating angel costumes. An angel really was going to appear huh… On second thought, didn’t that mean an appearing character died?

And then there were the elementary school students who were thought of as complete nuisances and luggage just the other day, but now they were our strong allies of production. They were completely a part of our fighting force. As I expected, elementary students were the best!

Rumi, who was particularly skilled with her fingers and focused in her work even in the group and to add the precedent where she came to us and asked what to do, was the odd jobs ace of the elementary team.

Even now, she was silently working on the angel costume as the other elementary students were messing around and talking to each other. They were watching her from afar, but they gradually dumped the work on her as if that seriousness of hers would be the end of them.

Still, doing all that alone really would be difficult, wouldn’t it…? I thought that and approached her and I selfishly sat down beside her. I then reached out for the tools to make the costume. When I did, my hand was stopped by a voice.

“Hachiman, it’s okay. Don’t need you.”

Rumi didn’t stop her working hands and continued her words without looking at me.

“I can do it alone.”

“Uh, you say that, but you…”

So she said, but the amount that was planned to be made was still quite a lot. The sizes were originally fitted to the size of a kindergartener and it wasn’t anything particularly big, but doing it alone was still probably going to be difficult. Even so, Rumi shook her head.

“It’s okay.”

“…I see. You can do it by yourself, huh?”

She probably really was planning to do it all by herself. It’s possible she might’ve been acting stubborn. And she might not even make it on time and cause trouble for others in the end too.

Even so, how she was trying her best alone was very noble.

I nosily pulled the chair and stood up. When I did, Rumi took a peek at me. Her expression looked lonely somehow and she gradually dropped her eyes.

Still standing, I lightly tapped my chest.

“But look here. I can do it better alone.”

When I said that, Rumi was looking at me blankly, but she then let out an astounded laugh.

“…What the heck is that… So dumb.”

After she said that with a small smile, Rumi stopped trying to keep me from working. We both cut through the cardboard and continued to make numerous wings.

Cooperation and trust were likely, more so than you could imagine, very cold things.

It was fine if you did things yourself, but that’s because you had to. By living your life without being a bother to anyone, for the very first time, you’d be able to ask for things

from people. Once you're able to live by yourself, for the very first time, you'd be able to walk alongside someone.

Because you lived by yourself, because you could do things by yourself, that you'd be able to do so with someone else.

I glanced at Rumi who was working next to me. This girl was probably going to be able to live by herself. If she could already do this in elementary school, she was in a good position. She was also cute too. That's why, one day, she'd be able to walk alongside someone. For the sake of that moment… It'd be better for her if she had a rehearsal of that here.

"… Hey, you, are you going to appear in our play?"

I asked her as I cut through the cardboard. When I did, Rumi quickly stopped her scissors and stared at me.

"…It's not 'you'."

"Hmm?"

What, why are you glaring at me like that so suddenly? Was it that? Were you one of those spirits that would peer into your face at your pillow side when you went to sleep at an inn? Like from those typical ghost stories?

"Rumi."

She said her name with a slightly upset tone and looked away. Apparently she wanted me to call her that. I was a little opposed to calling a girl by her first name though… Not only was it embarrassing, but I couldn't help but be worried that she would blurt out "Haa? You actin' like my boyfriend or something, huh?" if I called her first name.

As I worried about what to do, Rumi completely ignored me and was advancing her work. Doesn't look like she'll respond unless I call her name, huh…

"You see… Rumi?"

When I called her, Rumi dropped her gaze to the top of the desk and nodded her head.

"Do you want to try participating in our play?"

YOU gotta get out there. And then we both can go straight to Aikatsu! You have a real pretty face too, it'll totally work. Lemme produce ya, produce ya. You should totally start the Idol Activities with me.

Whether my zealous passion got through to her or not, Rumi thought for a little bit and then spoke up.

"…Is that something you can decide, Hachiman?"

"Ah? Aah, I'm something like the producer, so yeah."

I was also acting as an admiral[76] and a Love Liver[77]. Well, I wasn't sure if I could decide things on my own, but the play was set to feature elementary school students and kindergarteners so it shouldn't be an issue. Rumi stared at my face in a daze and looked like she was thinking of something, but she quickly averted her face and said in disinterest.

"Hmmm…. It's not like I can't do it or anything."

"Seriously? Thanks a bunch, Rumi Rumi."

"You're creepy for calling me Rumi Rumi."

Was this how fathers felt when their daughters called them creepy, I wonder…? It was surprisingly not very heart rendering, hey. As I was enveloped in a mysterious excitement, Rumi pasted together the white cardboard and asked.

"What play are you doing?"

"…Oh right, we haven't decided yet."

I was sure the student council was talking about it, but it might be a good idea to check their progress for now. As I was thinking, Rumi pulled on the cardboard from my hand and spoke in a cheeky tone.

"Why don't you go hurry up and decide?"

Apparently she was saying to leave everything to her. If she was going to say that, then I had to get going. For now, I'll make arrangements to pass things down to the helping hands and do the things I needed to do.

"…Alrighty then. See you."

I stood up as I said that and I headed for Sobu High in the middle of their work. The first thing to do was to check with Isshiki and as I looked around, Yuigahama came up to me with a brown envelope.

"Hikki, do you know where Iroha-chan and Yukinon are?"

"Looking right now."

"Oh okay. I got the money so I was wondering what to do with it."

Hahaa, it looked like she went and plundered the money off of Kaihin Sogo High. I wasn't sure what the deal was, but she was handling the money quite well despite being an idiot. She sure was domesticated…

We both looked around for Isshiki and the door to the Training Room opened. And came staggering out was Isshiki.

"What's wrong with you…?"

When I asked her, Isshiki stood still with a dark expression.

"When I asked Hayama-senpai for help, he said no…"

"Eh, no way, Hayato-kun did?"

Yuigahama was surprised. I was a little too. I was surprised not only by Hayama declining to help someone, but also at Isshiki who was going on the offensive despite having been rejected. Still, for that Hayama to do that, huh…

Isshiki looked away sadly and sniffed, but the corners of her mouth gradually turned into a broad grin. She then lifted her head and showed a super good smile and blurted out.

"Juuuust kidding. This is like, Hayama-senpai being totally conscious of me, you knooow? Oh gosh, this is working out better than I thought!"

"Aah, that so…"

I said so with an astounded tone. Talk about resilient. If this was natural to her, then she was a force not to be reckoned with. If she was just forcing herself, again, she really was resilient.

“Ah, speaking of which, he did say he would come on the day of the event.”

“Aah, I see. Is it okay if I call other people then?”

Isshiki said with a nonchalant face and Yuigahama spoke in sync and turned my way.

“Sure, why not? Don’t know who you’re talking about though.”

“…As usual, you’re saying whatever you want.”

A resigned voice called out to me from behind. When I turned around, Yukinoshita was standing behind me having arrived there at some point.

Yukinoshita greeted Yuigahama and Isshiki and began talking and giving instructions with occasional yawns mixed in.

“You look sleepy.”

“I haven’t slept. There were some things I had to do, you see…”

When I asked her, Yukinoshita answered briefly. Still, what ever could it be that she had to stay up all night for? As I thought that, Yukinoshita began taking things out from her bag. She then looked straight at Isshiki.

“Isshiki-san.”

“Y-Yes…”

It might’ve been her lack of sleep, but Yukinoshita’s eyes were sharper than normal. Thinking she got her upset again, Isshiki stiffened up. Yukinoshita made a sudden smile when she saw that. She then handed her numerous sheets of printouts.

“I put this together so use it if it’ll serve as references.”

“Haa…”

Isshiki took the papers and I looked at it as well. When I did, it looked like a checklist and documents.

The checklist had things that should be completed before the day of the event along with necessary goods. And for the documents, written on them were Yukinoshita-esque advice.

It proposed preparing compensation for the children who would participate in the play, had recipes for Christmas cakes, Gingerbread cookies along with an estimated cost of the ingredients. There were also a vacancy report regarding the cooking rooms located at the school and the community center.

As for advice for the play, there was a scenario of the sort written about having the guests participating. Hahaaan, this was totally that. It's basically like that Miracle Light stuff you used to cheer at a Pretty Cure movie.

Yuigahama, Isshiki, and I let out an "ooooh", "haaaah", "heeeeh" and as we became impressed, we continued reading on. Yukinoshita cleared her throat seemingly finding that a little uncomfortable and took something else from her bag.

"Also, this."

In Yukinoshita's hands were several books. She gave them to Isshiki.

"I'm not sure if these are to your tastes, but I gathered what I could find on traditional types of Christmas plays. And also, there should be a free CD player in the student council room, so try looking for that. I believe it'll be necessary for the play."

"…T-Thank you very much."

Isshiki stood there firmly with books and printouts in hand in bewilderment. I imagined being given all this stuff so suddenly would be a surprise. At least I was since I didn't think Yukinoshita would go this far in her preparations.

"You sure are something."

When I blurted that out, Yukinoshita gently looked away.

"It's because I can't deal with people the way you and Yuigahama can."

When she said that, Yuigahama and I looked at each other. We then laughed a little. Despite how she was, Yukinoshita was probably quite worried about Isshiki. You're so hard to read, gosh!

"So with this, most problems should've been dealt with."

Yukinoshita crossed her arms and placed her hand on her chin. It looked like she still had other things in mind. I tried to think as well, but the program was pretty much decided with this, so the only remaining problem should've been the time to finish the work.

"Well, pretty much."

"I see."

When I answered, Yukinoshita let out a satisfied sigh and quickly faced Isshiki.

"…Isshiki-san, I believe you should take over for the rest. That should be fine, right, Hikigaya-kun?"

"Yeah, it's not like I was in charge or anything in the first place anyway."

Up until now, I had only been working as a temporary stopgap so my actions weren't as if I was in charge. Until this very moment, a leader in the strictest sense of the word didn't exist at all.

"Um…"

Isshiki altered looks between me and Yukinoshita and spoke with a discouraged tone. Yukinoshita stopped her.

"I don't mind if you give out instructions. I'll participate in the work as well. It's okay for you to ask for help if you're having trouble."

"But, ummm… I still think it's kind of impossible for me."

Isshiki let out a worried "ahaha" laugh. When she did, Yukinoshita closed her eyes and gently shook her head.

"You can do it. There're people here supporting you, so it's okay to believe in them."

In response to that gentle tone, Isshiki replied "yes" with a small voice.

Chapter 10: Respectively, what the light in their palms illuminates is

Christmas was upon us again this year as well. That being said, it was actually still Christmas Eve, but today was the day the Christmas event collaboration, coordinated by the respective student councils of the schools Sobu High and Kaihin Sogo High, was finally being held.

The day before yesterday was a half day due to the closing ceremony and we were blessed with a national holiday along with more time to work. Our state of progress wasn't bad at all.

And since the event would be held starting from the afternoon, we were able to spend today's morning on work as well. In the morning, as per Isshiki's instructions, we were focusing our efforts on baking cakes and cookies. Because of spending most of yesterday preparing, even I felt there was a sweet aroma of the sort coming from all over my body.

Still, even with the sweet aroma, you couldn't say the same of the atmosphere at all, evident by the busyness enveloping the cooking room of the community center.

And the person who ascended as the master of this cooking room was working at the kitchen counter, Yukinoshita.

"Hikigaya-kun."

Although Yukinoshita called my name, she didn't say anything further. Well, she probably meant to hand over the fresh cream at my hands. Wait, at least tell me directly… As I thought that, I handed her the bowl.

"Here."

"Thank you."

After taking it, Yukinoshita began coating the sponge with the fresh cream and then called out to Yuigahama who was working on the side.

"Yuigahama-san. Are you all done with sealing the finished cookie bags?"

"Uh huh, I just finished. Should I bake the cake too?"

Yuigahama stood up as she spun her arms around seemingly having stiff shoulders and asked Yukinoshita. When she did, Yukinoshita immediately answered without halting her working hands.

“That’s all right. So absolutely make sure not to touch anything okay? And I mean absolutely.”

“Don’t you sound kind of mean!?”

“Never mind that, would it be okay if you went and picked up the resting dough in the refrigerator at school?”

Without hesitation, Yukinoshita warded off the crying Yuigahama and spoke without stopping her working hands.

“Okay…! C-Can it really sleep?”

“It’s a figure of speech. It should be inside the fridge, so could you go get it?”

There wasn’t any room for Yukinoshita to accompany Yuigahama today evident by how occupied she was. Gahama-san was so, so pitiful. But truthfully, it really was busy and with the oven ringing just now, the cooking room was fully operational.

Yuigahama was going to leave the cooking room as she muttered things like “is it sleeeeping?”

And then, the doors of the cooking room creaked open shyly.

The face that popped out from through the door was Totsuka’s.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Sai-chan?”

“Oh, when I asked the student council, they said to go here. I was wondering if I could help out and stuff. Right?”

Saying that, Totsuka turned behind him and furthermore, Komachi’s face popped out and she waved her hands at me. I did mention to her to stop by to relax and apparently she did. Moreover, I could hear some weird coughing like “gefun, gefun, okopooon” from behind those two, but let’s pretend as if I didn’t hear anything.

“Onii-chan, should Komachi help out too?”

Komachi entered the cooking room along with Totsuka as she said that.

“Oh, Totsuka-kun, Komachi-san. Hello.”

When Yukinoshita greeted them, the two said their hellos with a smile.

“Both of them said they’ll help.”

When I said that, Yuigahama clapped her hands and turned to Totsuka.

“Okay, Sai-chan, can you come with me to school? It looks like it’s resting so I might not be able to carry it by myself.”

“Okay, sure… What’s resting?”

Totsuka left the cooking room together with Yuigahama while being confused by her unnerving explanation. Could they really make it back here with the dough…? I was kind of worried as if this was their very first entrusted task.

“Well, could I ask Komachi-san to help me over here then? Cookies or cakes, which are your specialty?”

“Komachi can do either!”

Yukinoshita was getting Komachi to help her with making sweets in her own way.

“I see. That’ll be a big help. In that case, please take care of the ginger cookies. The recipe’s over there as well.”

“Okaaay! To be making sweets with Yukino-san, Komachi’s so happy with how much progress there is!”

What progress were you talking about, huh? Once Komachi cleaned her hands, she quickly got started on making one thing or another with Yukinoshita.

As I was nodding and watching those two girls having a friendly chat with each other while making sweets, this time, I could hear a “gefun, gefun, morusa” cough very close by. Was that really a cough?

I couldn't really ignore him given how close he was now, could I…? I gave up and turned in the direction of where I could hear the coughing. Directly behind me was Zaimokuza.

"Gefun, gefun."

"Zaimokuza, carry these boxes of cookies with me."

"R-Right… Perhaps you could explain the reason why I am present?"

"Nope, not interested. Ah, also, help me carry that set too."

"I-Indeed."

Unexpectedly, Zaimokuza obediently carried the box and we did some group work for a while.

× × ×

And then, the curtains were raised on the Christmas event collaboration

When I peeked out from the wing of the stage, there was a considerable amount of guests. Komachi, Totsuka, and even Zaimokuza were in the audience. I also spotted Kawasaki, Hayama, and the others close by as well. There was no doubt Kawasaki was here to see her little sister. As for Hayama and the others, Yuigahama and Isshiki probably called them.

Presently, Kaihin Sogo High's program was occupying the event hall.

As for what their schedule was, they had band performances done by students from Kaihin Sogo High and the classical business concert which compared to what they had planned at the beginning, the volume was rather lower, but even so, the audience was showing a good response.

For what they squeezed out, coupling the differences of the band and classical musical together looked like it was seeing some enjoyment. The performing musicians were all given a loud round of applause.

And it was almost time for Sobu High's program to start.

This time, my job was currently known as a super sub, not a particularly special position, but there wasn't all that much to do. As such, I was loitering about.

While Isshiki and the others were going through some mishaps and the like, they looked like they were getting them sorted out thoroughly.

I was doing nothing at the wing of the stage since I had no tasks to do and I could hear a very deep breath nearby. Upon taking a look, Isshiki had a nervous expression as she peeked at the audience.

"How're things going?"

When I called out to her, Isshiki turned around and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ah, senpai. Gosh, it's definitely baaad!"

"The scenario was nicely written and the only hiccups during the rehearsal were just the planning portions. You don't need to fret over it so much."

When I said that, Isshiki looked boastful as she puffed up with pride.

"The scenario was written by our secretary-chan after all. Besides… You senpais taught me a lot too… Ah, that's right. I need to get going to the others, okay!"

Isshiki spoke her last words quickly as if trying to hide her embarrassment and noisily ran off. And when she exited the wing of the stage, she turned around.

"Ah, as for the timing to the final, please check with the vice president. Also, please take care of the cake as well."

"Roger that, prez."

I answered briefly and watched Isshiki off as she headed to the other officers.

× × ×

And then, the curtains of the stage were raised.

The audience lights went out and the stage lights were still off.

“One dollar and eighty-seven cents… That was all…”

A narration could be heard from the darkness. Following that, the stage was lit and Rumi, wearing a blonde wig, was lamenting as she counted her small change. The narration continued further.

“But, as I thought, it’s still one dollar and eighty-seven cents. The next day is Christmas too.”

I recalled this opening scene from somewhere.

Amongst the numerous books that were given to Isshiki from Yukinoshita, the one she chose was called “The Gift of the Magi”[78].

Not only was it short in length, but the number of characters was low. On top of that, the story was constructed from primarily narration, so there wasn’t that much individual responsibility for the actors and there wasn’t a need to break up into two groups of onstage and line reading actors. Considering how much time there was to prepare, this was probably the best choice. I was honestly surprised at the choice that went beyond what I suggested.

Compared to Kaihin Sogo High from earlier, the stage was adorned with a homemade feeling in a plain way. The costumes and other things were chosen with a lot of care, but even so, it didn’t come off as something from a school arts festival.

On the stage, Rumi unfastened her tied blonde hair and stood before the mirror, but she eventually wore her coat, put on a hat, and disappeared to the wing of the stage.

The stage blacked out and when the light returned to the stage once again, the stage was set up as a city in Christmas. The cardboard and plywood were painted, papers were posted, and backdrops that resembled buildings made of brick were created, and a tree that was carried was at the center of everything. With the backdrops surrounding the tree, it looked very big.

And then, the scene changed with the spotlight focusing on the signboard indicating “Mne. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds”. On the stage along with Rumi was one more person, a girl acting as the landlady of the shop.

Rumi took a step inside and gulped. And with her throat shivering, she mustered her courage and called out.

“…Will you buy my hair?”

She spoke those lines. I knew it. She definitely had the qualities of an idol… I wanted to watch this until the very end, but I couldn't.

Once I saw that the scene ended, I left the hall.

× × ×

When I returned to the cooking room, Yukinoshita was sitting in exhaustion while Yuigahama was tearing apart a cookie. Um, those cookies were presents for the end, you know… Well, if those were just extras, then it's fine.

"Good work. Did you finish all the cakes?"

When I asked, Yukinoshita pointed at the kitchen counter.

"We managed somehow… How's the stage?"

"Looking good. It's almost the end, so we should get going and carry this out."

I said that and lifted up the last cake. When I did, Yuigahama finished her cookie, clapped her hands, and stood up. Yukinoshita stood up following her as well.

"I really wanted to see the play too."

"You'll be able to watch the last scene, that's good enough isn't it? Let's go."

And then, with the last cake in hand, we climbed the stairs and carried it to the hall. The other cakes that were finished were already carried over.

At the front of the door to the hall were numerous kindergarteners along with their school teachers. And glued to the door with his ears to the intercom was the vice president.

"It's about time. We'll leave the preparations to you."

"Sure thing."

I answered and when I entrusted the cake to Yuigahama, the vice president and I placed our hands on opposite doors. This door was to be opened at a particular scene at the same time.

When I peeked through the slightly open door, it looked like they were approaching the last scene.

“Now, put the chops on.”

The elementary school student who was forced into labor spoke his line and on the stage was the opening of a Christmas dinner. And then, a relay of narration by the elementary school students continued on.

“Of all who give gifts, these two were the wisest.”

“Of all who give and receive gifts, people such as these two are the wisest.”

“No matter where in the world, these people are the greatest magi.”

“…That’s why from us, we will give them. And then, we will give to everyone. A gift containing only the heart.”

“Merry Christmas!”

At the very end, all the numerous narrating voices combined together and descending from the stage was an angel.

“Meeeeeerry Christmaaaas!”

Appearing from the wing of the stage was Kawasaki’s little sister, Keika. Keika was adorned in an angel outfit and was carrying out a cake. When I took a glance at the audience, Kawasaki was cheering on Keika as she watched her. Are you a mom or something?

The audience loudly cheered to the appearance of the adorable angel.

Matching that timing, the vice president and I threw open the door without a moment’s delay.

Similarly to Keika, kindergarteners donned in angel outfits entered the hall with cakes in hand. Kindergartners were angels.[79] The kindergartners carried cakes to the older people in the audience.

The faces of the older people softened to the adorable kindergartners.

But the play wasn’t over yet.

“Merry Christmas.”

On the stage, Keika, Rumi, and the child in forced servitude lighted candles. And then, the angelic kindergartners provided candlelight service of lighting the candles on the cakes they distributed.

The candles on stage and in the audience almost simultaneously illuminated at the same time. The only lighting right now was only on the pin spot of the stage. Following the angels, small flames began to expand to the audience one by one and the entirety of the hall was illuminated with a warm and soft light.

The stage and the audience were connected by the light and when the audience became one with the scenery, the audience let out a breath of wonder. That also applied to the three of us who were watching at the back of the hall.

“…Well, I suppose I’ll give it a passing grade.”

Watching next to me, Yukinoshita muttered. Despite saying that, she was making a sweet smile. Gosh, you sure weren’t honest, really.

The true nature behind the service was for customer satisfaction. One time entertainment aimed for satisfaction at just that moment. It’s exactly because it was something you couldn’t enjoy by doing it over repeatedly that it was fine as long we managed to capture the mood at that instant.

This was something implicitly suggested by Yukinoshita and this was the answer given by Isshiki.

She was quite something to come up with an answer like this. Was it the Destinyland effect? Yeah right…

“Heeeh, this sure is amazing, it’s like, FIRE!”

When Yuigahama spoke while going “whooaa”, Yukinoshita answered calmly.

“It’s called candlelight service.”

“Did you mix campfire together or something?”

“I-It’s kind of the same thing, jeez.”

When I wryly smiled at Yuigahama who said so indignantly, a curtain call was being conducted.

After the performers and narrator were called on stage, they were introduced followed by a bow.

When Keika who performed as the angel appeared, Kawasaki was taking tons of pictures. Like I said, are you a mom or something?

And lastly, the main actor, Rumi, came out. Rumi looked bewildered from the large round of applause, but when she joined hands with everyone on stage, she made a big bow.

In the far back of the hall, I was watching the illumination of the audience, on the side where the light reached. Reflexively, I got emotional from Rumi's big moment on stage. This was a blessing more than I could ask for as a producer, really.

I won't forget okay! About today's stage![80]

After that, we had cakes, ginger cookies, and tea cakes, and the area transitioned to a Christmas tea party.

The people at Kaihin Sogo High as well as the people at Sobu High were eating cake while having friendly chats.

We alternated turns as the staff to serve the kindergartners and older people, assimilating in the party. I visited the hall to check if there were any empty cups and tableware.

When I looked around, my gaze met with Tamanawa who was eating cake. Tamanawa flicked his bangs and turned away. Nearby Tamanawa were Orimoto and her friends doing a toast with paper cups and laughing loudly.

Next to the stage were Hayama and the others with a crowd of people around them. It looked like the elementary school kids spotted them. Continuing from the camping trip, they were seemingly popular.

And surprisingly, Rumi was in the middle of it.

I didn't know what Rumi and Hayama and the others were talking about.

But the smile that Rumi was showing at this moment didn't hurt my chest and was dimly, yet warmly glowing like the faint glow of the candles.

× × ×

I walked on the grounds of the school.

It became late since we had to clean up after the Christmas event collaboration ended.

As part of the cleaning, the tools and miscellaneous things used during the event were carried to the student council room, but since it was already filled to the brim with Isshiki's personal belongings, we were stuck as to where to store the items.

I tried to throw the tinsels and ornaments away, but I was denied the chance because Isshiki suggested that they might come in handy again in the future. That's called being a hoarder, you know… Since there was no helping it, it was decided the Service Club would hold onto the things temporarily in the club room and the rest was left up to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

After that, I was brought along to organize the student council room since a while ago, but I was finally released from there.

What's left was to report the completion of the request to the two who went ahead to the club and call it a day

Since we were now in the middle of winter break, there was no one else other than me walking in the hallway of the special building. In this quiet hallway, my footsteps reverberated considerably loudly.

I placed my hands on the door to the club room. In that instant, there was a whiff of a faint, but good fragrance. Upon entering the room, it was slightly warm.

"Ah, welcome back."

"Good work."

Yuigahama sat in her usual seat and Yukinoshita was just starting to pour tea. When I sat at my own seat, I stared at the tea set on top of the table. The warmth and smell probably

stemmed from there. It felt very nostalgic, not having seen this very scenery in the past month.

“Yuigahama-san, I poured the tea.”

When Yukinoshita finished pouring the tea, she called to Yuigahama.

On the top of the table, there was a mug with a printed picture of a lethargic dog and a pretty teacup resting on a saucer. The respective owners picked up their cups.

And the last remaining one printed with “Panda Pan-san” was a teacup.

A puff of steam drifted upwards from the teacup that was picked up by no one.

“Eh, what’s this all about?”

It was probably my portion of tea, but usually it was supposed to have been poured in a paper cup. When I asked, Yuigahama and Yukinoshita’s voices overlapped as they answered.

“It’s a Christmas present!”

“It’s quite a waste if only a single person was using paper cups.”

The reasons these two gave were clearly different from each other… What’s the right answer, huh? I looked at Yuigahama and she looked excited as she gave an explanation seemingly having fun.

“We both bought it for you! I picked the shape and Yukinon picked the design!”

I thought so… The fact that a teacup with Pan-san printed on it was chosen just for drinking tea was enough to tell me what the deal was. Still, what I didn’t get was their holding of a present exchange party without me being aware of it. I never got an invitation though?

“Wait, you said present, but I didn’t prepare anything myself…”

I said that as I scratched my cheeks apologetically to this one-sided exchange, but Yukinoshita placed her cup on the saucer and spoke calmly.

“You don’t have to worry about it. It’s just replacing the paper cups.”

Right, so you're going with the paper cups explanation in the end, huh…? Well, that's fine too. It may be just a replacement for the paper cups, but I wasn't perverse enough to be stubborn about it and accepted it.

"…Thanks. For giving me the teacup."

"You're welcome!"

When I thanked them with words that were rather honest coming from me, Yuigahama returned a smile with a giggle. Also, if I was giving my gratitude, there was one more thing as well.

"Also… For the request too. Aah… Thanks. You really helped me out. I was able to finish it safely without much trouble thanks to you two."

I quickly bowed my head and stayed like that for a moment.

The event that I thought I couldn't see ending or rather, the event that I thought would end in a way that didn't take responsibility was able to be finished safely due to requesting the help from these two. I wasn't sure if I had personally owed up to the responsibility, but even so, I bowed my head because I wanted to properly thank them.

"The request still isn't over, right?"

Yukinoshita spoke to me with my head still bowing. I lifted my head in response to the reply that didn't consent to what I said.

When I did, Yukinoshita traced the rim of her teacup with her fingers and smiled with a slightly troubled and surprised expression.

"…I said I accepted your request, remember?"

"No, that should've ended already. What's this, a riddle?"

When I asked her, Yukinoshita made an abrupt, cheerful laugh.

"I suppose so, it might be a riddle."

That smile and her teasing-like voice were innocent. It was in complete contrast to her typical adult image and I felt that I came to know another side of her that I was unaware of. However, her riddle answer was something I still didn't understand.

Watching our exchange in a daze, Yuigahama went "ah" suddenly with a small voice. Then, with a gaze that wasn't looking anywhere, she slipped out a murmur.

"I think… I kind of understand… It might be okay if Hikki doesn't though."

"Ah?"

"Well, putting that aside!"

When I tried to ask about it, Yuigahama energetically hit the desk and stood up from her chair.

"What should we do about our Christmas? Like, afterwards! Ah, or like tomorrow! It's still Christmas too! Let's have a party!"

"No, we're not doing that…"

Although I said that, Yuigahama didn't look like she was listening to me and faced Yukinoshita.

"Yukinon, do you… have any plans?"

Her anxious voice was probably from being worried about that one time when she asked about her Christmas plans in those nonchalant, superficial conversations. Yukinoshita returned a gentle, faint smile.

"…If we're going to do it, I'll open up my schedule."

In response to that, Yuigahama's face instantly brightened up.

"Really!? Yay! Okay, it's decided then."

"So you're not going to ask me about my plans then… Or could it be that you're trying to indirectly say I wasn't invited?"

"I mean, Hikki's definitely going to have nothing to do anyway… Ah, so like, the party! I want to eat Yukinon's cake!"

"The cake you were eating just now was the one I made though… Also, I don't want to. I don't want to make things like that for a while…"

Apparently, it must've been really difficult as Yukinoshita showed a fed up expression. Uh, I got the feeling you were really into it when you were making them though…

Looking at the reluctant Yukinoshita, Yuigahama groaned.

"If Yukinon's not going to make any… T-Then I can make it instead?"

Yuigahama pointed at herself as if it was "the most amazing idea!" and spoke, but Yukinoshita's expression sank.

"If you're going to say that, even if I don't want to, there's no choice but for me to make it then…"

"Isn't that kind of mean!? Ah, then we can make it together or something!"

Yuigahama peeked at Yukinoshita with a smile and Yukinoshita choked on her words. She then let out a short sigh as if she gave up and smiled.

"…I suppose so. That might not be out of the question then."

She fell… Seeing them reciprocate their smiles, I made a wry smile and looked away.

In that instant, I looked outside the window and the setting sun was bright. Before the evening sun sank into the sea, it showed its final brilliance and just for a very slight moment, the room was enveloped in sunlight. Even so, eventually night would come and it would get cold.

But today was Christmas and I was optimistic about the current nights still being somewhat warm.

If what I wished for was granted to me, if what I wanted was given to me.

Then, as I thought, I wouldn't wish for anything nor want anything.

Because the things you were granted and the things you were given were surely shams that would one day be lost.

The things you wished for had no shape and the things you wanted were untouchable. Or possibly, they might be the most wonderful treasures ever that would become nothing if you were to touch them.

On that shining stage, what my eyes laid upon was the conclusion to that "story".

Here I was, not knowing what happens beyond it.

That's why I will surely continue to search for it for a long time.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Watari Wataru.

It sure is spring! And speaking of spring, it's the season of meetings and also the season of break ups. It's something like "which is it!?", but I want to break up with work already and meet up with vacation though? Oh?

But, really, in the world, the phrase "which is it, huh?" is said way too much, right?

For example, deadlines! When you hear the word deadline, it's normal to think "I better make it (life on the line)", but part of it is more to make you blurt out things like "Hahaan, it's a lying schedule to get me to panic and to motivate me! Just two more weeks to go!"

In addition, words differed when it came to the word "deadline". A certain person answers with "j-just a little more (big lie)", a different certain individual responds with "that's obviously impossible (distant eyes)", and that certain person says again "let me rest already… (crying voice)".

The meaning of words might be influenced by factors like circumstances and a person's sense of values and accomplishments. Words that are concrete would mean as they are, but it applies more so with words that tried to point out abstract concepts. For example, things like growth, change, and things that are genuine. If you talked about them, it's likely that everyone would have a different interpretation of what was said.

If that's the case, the things conveyed through words are unexpectedly abundant. But that's why even if you thought you conveyed something or you thought you could convey something, it's likely that wasn't the case at all and ultimately, the side that conveyed something was just drowning in self-satisfaction. While thinking novels were pretty much exactly like that, I am writing today as well.

――Even so, that's why I hope his self-satisfaction, even if it's just now, is also his happiness as well.

So with that, this was "Yahari Ore no Seishun Rabu Kome ha Machigatteiru." Volume 9.

Word of thanks to the following.

Divinity Ponkon8. I look forward to seeing the rough drafts of the cover for every volume, but the tension really went off the roof past the top level for Hiratsuka-sensei following Komachi. Wonderful! Thank you very much.

Editor-in-charge Hoshino-sama. Oh, no worries, next one will be easy, gahaha! Just how much longer will I be able to continue saying this… I apologize as always for everything. Thank you very much. Oh, no worries, next one will be easy, gahaha!

Also, the book, “The Gift of the Magi” (Written O. Henry/Translated by Yuuki Hiroshi) was used in this volume.

Finally, to all of the readers of this series. Thanks to you all, this story is nearing the final stages. It will be continuing just for a little longer. I will be very happy if you can accompany me until the end. Again, due to all your support, the second season of the anime was green-lighted. Thank you very much.

Now then, with that all being said, I have now used up all my space and I will stop my writing as of here.

A certain day in March, while the storm of spring rages on, I create a tower of empty MAX Coffee cans,

Watari Wataru

Translation Notes

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cd0sEmFq9tA
2. Soy sauce manufacturer which is based in Chiba
3. Kikuko Inoue is a voice actor who has a thing for the number 17.
4. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=STXZGjV9Yzw not too sure about this joke, but I'm pretty much, "I'd go through hoops and hurdles if I could"
5. Happiness Charge Precure!
6. Middle school delinquent talk which got turned into a joke.
7. The joke stems from a song title called "POISON ~言いたいことも言えないこんな世の中は～ in the album, HIGH LIFE. The song can be translated as "POISON ~This World Where You Can't Say The Things You Want to Say~".
8. Puella Magi Madoka Magica
9. Something about a Japanese professional baseball player pitching in consecutive games followed by a rainy day and then after that.
10. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pre-established_harmony
11. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hatsum%C5%8Dde
12. http://tenkawa_akito_99.tripod.com/mech/bjump.html
13. 2chan slang where they abbreviate the rest of their message because they don't need to say what should be understood. Not really sure what the 4chan equivalent would be.
14. Inari, Konkon, Koi Iroha. Also, he uses the kanji for the verb "to come" and the first two "kons" mean "to not come" while the "koi" meant "to come" which corresponds to his joke.
15. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Kongre%C3%9F_tanzt
16. Fujioshi speak. Orimoto says "ukeru" which is also used in fujoshi speak, uke and seme.
17. http://digimon.wikia.com/wiki/Digimon_Sovereigns
18. "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" maybe
19. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ai_Fukuhara. This has to do with how Isshiki says "Who knows?" which is "saa" and Ai Fukuhara apparently says "saa" in her matches or whatever. It's sort of like a scream to pump herself up in a match.
20. Reschedule
21. Watari actually eats out quite a bit so I'm assuming this is a restaurant that he's been to that offers beef tongue.
22. As you noticed, there were a lot of words fully capitalized and this reflects which words were in katakana which is one of the writing systems typically used for foreign

loan words. That being said, the way they're used so often here as duly noted by Hachiman is akin to buzzwords. I don't think it's possible to translate this to English unless you're being extremely liberal so I went with capitals to emphasize the words instead.

23. http://keroro.wikia.com/wiki/Ruu_Ooshiba, he spells his penname in katakana
24. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Where_Do_We_Come_From%3F_What_Are_We%3F_Where_Are_We_Going%3F
25. The situation when the relationships in a club turns to crap because of various issues usually related to love.
26. Saikin, Imouto no Yousu ga Chotto Okashiinda ga
27. Says this in English
28. KFC
29. Jojo's Bizarre Adventure. A line spoken by Prosciutto. The original line "Whenever we think of that word (Kill)... In reality, it has already happened!"
30. OreImo
31. Morse code that spells out "aishiteru" which means "I love you".
32. http://jigokuno.img.jugem.jp/20100218_1708335.gif
33. The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi
34. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daigo_Umehara - Something Daigo said in an interview because he won quite a bit which subsequently became a 2chan meme(?).
35. Not really sure if this was a reference to something, but it means "disposition, nature"
36. Nisekoi
37. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otoko_wa_Tsurai_yo. The uncle of the main character was nicknamed Oi-chan.
38. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pink_noise
39. http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/sai-no-kawara.html
40. Saber Marionette J
41. Samurai X. A quote from Shishio Makoto.
42. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Z2HMQ4gea0 The skit is about two guys who get shipwrecked at a snow mountain. One guy thinks they won't be saved so he goes to sleep instead. The other guy starts screaming, we can still be saved, we can still be saved, and then says Madagascar and finds it on the globe. The joke stems from the similar pronunciation of "we can still be saved" which is "madatasukaru" and "Madagascar" is pronounced "madagasukaru".
43. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpCS5NQhRdA A line from this song. The original line is every single one of them were sparkling maidens!

44. Yuigoh ZEXAL. Referring to the duel between Astral and Number 96 who are white and black respectively.
45. Chiba plus Italian
46. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qx2b-nK_Q8o
47. Kinnikuman – A line spoken by Geronimo.
48. http://www.momoya.co.jp/
49. It's a sexual innuendo where eating meat gave the image of having carnal desires in Japanese culture. The original line would be "A guy and woman eating yakiniku together are having sex."
50. First Kitchen is pronounced as "fakkin" in Japanese. You should be able to solve this.
51. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FKChBsYtJc Mister Ajikko
52. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8OkpRK2_gVs Attack on Titan opening. He changes some of the lyrics, particularly the part about starving wolves.
53. Dragon Quest
54. Mayoi Chiki reference
55. Sekai Seifuku: Bōryaku no Zvezda
56. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_%28actor%29
57. Gomi means trash.
58. JoJo's Bizarre Adventure parody of Dio Brando's Stand, THE WORLD or also ZA WARUDO
59. The idiom is "castles in the sky". Adjusted it to rice cakes so it follows with the following sentence.
60. A parody of Pooh's Hunny Hunt maybe?
61. A parody of Disneyland's Haunted Mansion attraction
62. Non Non Biyori
63. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ou-e_YFSgmE "Nen pasu (年パス)" means "year pass".
64. This might be a pun on the word jealousy which is "urayamashii".
65. A parody of Space Mountain at Disneyland
66. Buddy Complex
67. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gundam_Reconguista_in_G
68. A parody of Pooh's Hunny Hunt ride at Disney Land
69. A parody of Marie from AristoCats.
70. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_school_uniform
71. A parody of http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Br%27er_Fox_and_Br%27er_Bear
72. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_Mahjong_yaku#Yakuman_hands
73. A reference to the first opening of Detective Conan, Mune ga Dokidoki.
74. In case you don't get it, Hachiman means 80,000 literally.

75. https://twitter.com/takashi_sansu
76. Kancolle
77. Love Live!
78. http://www.auburn.edu/~vestmon/Gift_of_the_Magi.html
79. This might be a pun, but kindergartners = enji, angels = enjeru, They sound similar.
80. Love Live